

---

## Peyote Woman

---

James Treat

Department of Religion, 3072 FLB, MC-166,  
University of Illinois, Urbana, IL 61801, USA  
treaty@illinois.edu

### Abstract

American Indians and their traditions are a vital nexus of religion and ecology. Even postcolonial native movements that incorporate various Christian traditions are typically grounded in the natural world. Toward the end of the nineteenth century, ethnologist James Mooney happened upon one such phenomenon while conducting research in Indian Territory. Several Southern Plains tribes had taken up the sacramental use of peyote, a small, spineless cactus endemic to the southern Rio Grande Valley and northern Mexico. Various oral accounts attribute the origin of modern peyote religion to a woman. Mooney first witnessed Peyote Woman's ceremony in February 1891, when he was invited to a riverside encampment several miles west of Anadarko, Oklahoma. Peyote Woman and her followers made quite an impression on Mooney. Peyote may be the indispensable element of practicing its namesake religion, but the key to understanding and interpreting this tradition is Peyote Woman.

### Keywords

Peyote religion, Peyote Woman, Kiowa Indians, James Mooney, nature religion, Catherine Albanese.

American Indians and their traditions are a vital nexus of religion and ecology. Native peoples 'lived symbolically with nature at center and boundaries', wrote historian Catherine Albanese in the first chapter of *Nature Religion in America*: 'They understood the world as one that answered personally to their needs and words and, in turn, perceived themselves and their societies as part of a sacred landscape' (1990: 25). Her generalized reconstruction of indigenous religions in the era of

salvage ethnography, and her more focused survey of Algonkian cultures in colonial New England, both support the conclusion that 'nature religion, if it lived in America at all, lived among' American Indians (Albanese 1990: 25). 'Nature religion, in sum, formed and framed native North American life from birth until death' and beyond: 'Nature religion shaped mentality; it lay behind behavior in symbolic and ordinary settings; it worked to achieve a harmony that was also an attempt to control the powers that impinged on life as native peoples knew it' (1990: 33). Like other academic abstractions, *nature religion* is an interpretive construct highlighting aspects of human experience that might otherwise go unnoticed.

Many tribal traditions survived the onslaught of European and American imperialism and remain exemplars of nature religion today. Even postcolonial native movements that incorporate various Christian traditions are typically grounded in the natural world. Toward the end of the nineteenth century, ethnologist James Mooney happened upon one such phenomenon while conducting research in Indian Territory. Several Southern Plains tribes had taken up the sacramental use of peyote, a small, spineless cactus endemic to the southern Rio Grande Valley and northern Mexico. 'In its main features the ceremony is a form of elemental worship', Mooney reported, with prayers and songs acknowledging the sacrament 'and the various powers of nature', including 'the fire, the rain, the earth, the sun and the morning star'. He also recognized that 'almost every species of cactus has a food or medicinal value' in the indigenous world, and that peyote is 'reverenced by these tribes' not only as a sacred substance 'but as a health-bringing panacea for all bodily ills' as well (Mooney 1892a).

Various oral accounts attribute the origin of modern peyote religion to a woman. Her story was first recorded in the 1890s:

Two young men had gone upon a war expedition to the far south. They did not return at the expected time, and after long waiting their sister, according to the Indian custom, retired alone to the hills to bewail their death. Worn out with grief and weeping, as night came on she was unable to get back to the camp and lay down where she was.

In her dreams the peyote spirit came to her and said: 'You wail for your brothers, but they still live. In the morning look, and where your head now rests, you will find that which will restore them to you.' The spirit then gave her farther instruction and was gone. With daylight she arose, and on looking where she had slept found a peyote, which she dug up and took back with her to camp.

Here she summoned the priests of the tribe, to whom she told her vision and delivered the instructions which she had received from the spirit. Under her direction the sacred tipi was set up with its crescent mound, and

the old men entered and said the prayers and sang the songs and ate the peyote—which seems to have been miraculously multiplied—until daylight, when they saw in their visions a picture of the two young warriors, wandering on foot and hungry in the far off passes of the Sierra Madre.

A strong party was organized to penetrate the enemy's country, and after many days the young men were found and restored to their people. Since then the peyote is eaten by the Indians with song and prayer that they may see visions and know inspiration, and the young girl who first gave it is venerated as the 'Peyote woman' (Mooney 1897: 330).

Kiowa peyotists shared this version of Peyote Woman's story with Mooney while he was working on the Kiowa-Comanche-Apache Reservation. He also acquired 'a peculiarly symbolic rattle' used in the peyote ceremony: 'Being only about nine inches long', the small instrument is decorated with feathers, beads, and buckskin fringe. 'The gourd of the rattle is about the size of a small hen egg, being the ordinary gourd commonly used for this purpose, and is covered with carvings symbolic of the rite, which seems to be a worship of the elements or the powers of nature' (Mooney 1892b: 64). The gourd's earthy iconography features incised and colored signs of falling rain, vocal music, a hummingbird drawing nectar from a flower, and 'a figure with a round center painted yellow, from which radiate six curved lines, running out from a double circle of yellow dots around the central disk', representing the sacrament itself, 'yellow being the color symbolic of the sun, or rather of the auroral morning light' (1892b: 64-65). By the side of this peyote button is the gourd's 'principal figure, the rude semblance of a woman, with a sort of crown or halo about her head, a fan in her left hand, and a star under her feet'. It is an image of Peyote Woman, '*Sei-Mi'i'yi* of the Kiowa—the presiding goddess of the ceremony' (Mooney 1892b: 65):

The figure has a double meaning, and while apparently only a fantastic figure of a woman, it conveys also to the minds of the initiated a symbolic representation of the interior of the sacred [peyote] lodge.

Turning the rattle with the handle toward the east, the lines forming the halo about the head of the figure represent the circle of devotees within the lodge.

The head itself, with the spots for eyes and mouth, represents the large consecrated [peyote] which is placed upon a crescent-shaped mound of earth in the center of the lodge, this mound being represented in the figure by a broad curving line, painted yellow, forming the curve of the shoulders.

Below this is a smaller crescent curve—the original surface of the gourd—representing the smaller crescent mound of ashes built up within the crescent of earth as the ceremony progresses.

The horns of both crescents point toward the door of the lodge on the east side, which in the figure is toward the feet.

In the center of the body is a round circle, painted red, emblematic of the fire within the horns of the crescent of the lodge.

The lower part of the body is green, symbolic of the eastern ocean, beyond which dwells the goddess, and the star under her feet is the morning star, which heralds her approach.

In her left hand is a figure representing the fan of eagle feathers used to shield the eyes from the glare of the fire during the ceremony (Mooney 1892b: 65).

Mooney first witnessed Peyote Woman's ceremony in February 1891, when he was invited to a riverside encampment several miles west of Anadarko. There he joined 'about thirty Kiowas, Comanches, and Apaches' for the all-night ceremony in a white canvas tipi: 'The door faced the east, the ground was cleanly swept and in the center was a firehole, with a crescent shaped mound of earth half encircling it on the farther side and sloping down to the floor at each end' (Mooney 1892a). Bunches of fragrant sage covered the seating area around the perimeter of the lodge, and firewood was stacked next to the doorway. 'All sat silently looking intently into the fire as we took our places in the circle' (Mooney 1892a).

'It was about 10 o'clock' when an elderly leader stoked the fire, 'fanning it into a blaze with a beaded eagle feather used only in this ceremony' (Mooney 1892a). He then opened the proceedings with

an exhortation to the participants to enter into the ceremony with the proper religious spirit, and a special word to me to the effect that they had permitted me to be present that I might note everything, so that on my return I could tell the government and the white men that it was all good and not bad, and that it was the religion of the Indians in which they believed, and which was as dear to them as ours is to us (Mooney 1892a).

The long winter night was warmed by singing and praying around the sacred fire, which

took on strange shapes as it blazed up and again died down, throwing weird shadows over the dark forms around the circle, until at last the whole thing seemed as unreal and far away as the memory of a dream. From time to time the old man placed fresh wood upon the fire and carefully piled up the ashes so as to form a white crescent just within the crescent mound of earth (Mooney 1892a).

At daybreak an infant 'sick almost to death' was brought in for special prayers, followed by the ceremonial breakfast and the closing song. 'With a final prayer and another request from the old man that I should go back and tell the whites that the Indians had a religion of their own which they loved, the ceremony ended' (Mooney 1892a).

Peyote Woman and her followers made quite an impression on Mooney. He would spend 30 years studying peyote religion, and he

understood the tradition better than any other outsider of his time. Although he died before completing his monograph on peyotism, Mooney did document the ceremony on several occasions. 'The use of the plant for medical and religious purposes is probably as ancient as the Indian occupancy of the region over which it grows', he wrote (Mooney 1896: 7). 'On account of its medical properties and its wonderful effect on the imagination, it is regarded by the Indians as the vegetal incarnation of a deity, and a whole system of myth and ritual has grown up in connection with its use' (Mooney 1898: 239). Among the Kiowas and Comanches and other Plains tribes, the peyote ceremony is one of 'prayer and quiet contemplation. It is usually performed as an invocation for the recovery of some sick person' (Mooney 1910). Medicinal benefit notwithstanding, 'the psychologic effect is perhaps the most interesting, as it certainly is the most wonderful phenomenon in connection with the plant. Much of this is undoubtedly due to the ceremonial accompaniments of prayer and song, the sounds of the drum and rattle, and the glare of the fire' (Mooney 1896: 10).

Kiowa women of the day usually were not present inside the tipi through the nightlong ceremony, but Mooney was aware of their integral role in the service. 'As the first clear beam of light shines from the east', the leader sings the 'Morning Star song', which 'rouses every dreamer to instant alertness like the sound of a triumphal march. At its close there is a pause and the women, who have been waiting outside for this signal, hand in the four vessels of sacred food—water, parched corn, hashed and sweetened beef, and stewed fruit'. More singing ensues as the sun rises, and the sacred foods are passed around the circle. 'When the last morsel is consumed they file out of the tipi, which is then quickly taken down by the women, while the recent worshippers sit about to gossip or sing their new songs until their wives announce that dinner is ready, when the whole company partakes of the best feast the host can provide' (Mooney 1897: 333). This gendered division of religious labor reflected older traditions of camp life, which Mooney experienced while living with a Kiowa family periodically for the better part of three decades. 'Woman is the great industrial factor in Indian life', he observed (Mooney 1913: 102), and his maternal host was 'one of the best and kindest women I have ever known' (Mooney 1911: 49). The tipi was the woman's domain; she controlled nearly every aspect of its manufacture, furnishment, and use. Some specialized in 'the art of cutting and fitting the tipi cover', and 'the woman who does this work is supposed to be of good disposition, because if any other kind of a woman builds the tipi, things will never go right inside' (Mooney 1913: 101-2).

Mooney was also the sacrament's staunchest defender in the dominant culture. Peyote 'has been condemned without investigation' since the onset of European colonization. 'In proportion as the plant was held sacred by the Indians, so it was regarded by the early missionaries as the direct invention of the devil, and the eating of the peyote was made a crime equal in enormity to the eating of human flesh'. Even under the Americans, 'severe penalties have been threatened and inflicted against Indians using it or having it in their possession' (Mooney 1896: 7). But 'I know from experience', Mooney wrote, that peyote 'enables one to endure great physical strains without injurious reaction'. He had refrained from consuming any peyote buttons during the first ceremony he attended, 'and the result was that from cold, numbness and exhaustion I was hardly able to stand upon my feet when it was over. Since then I have always taken three or four, and have been able to take note of all that occurred throughout the night, coming out in the morning as fresh as at the start' and going about the ordinary business of the day as if he had enjoyed a full night's sleep (Mooney 1896: 10). Toward the end of his life, he could recall having eaten the sacrament 'eight or ten times' while attending peyote meetings (Anonymous 1918: 107).

In February 1915, Mooney was asked to represent the Bureau of American Ethnology at a meeting of the Board of Indian Commissioners, an advisory group to the Bureau of Indian Affairs in Washington, DC. After briefly summarizing his research on peyotism in what had become southwestern Oklahoma, he recounted the story of Peyote Woman:

Some young men went on the warpath to the south and were gone for so long a time that their friends at home became afraid they would never return. There was a young woman, a sister of one of the war party, who went out to a hill beyond the camp every evening to watch for her brother, in accordance with the Indian custom, and pray for his return.

Finally one evening she fell asleep, and a spirit came to her in a dream, telling her that there was something growing out of the ground under her head which would bring her to her brother if used according to the instructions which the spirit then gave her. When she awoke she looked and found a number of peyotes growing.

These she gathered and took back to camp, and then, calling the old men together, told them how to prepare everything for the ceremony as the spirit had directed. They set up the tepee and performed the rite, and in the peyote vision they saw where the young man was lying alone, wounded and starving.

And they sent out a party and brought him home to his sister. There is always a religious myth in connection with the peyote rite. That is the story the Kiowa tell of how the rite came to them. Each tribe has its own story (Anonymous 1918: 70).

This rendition hewed closely to the version Mooney had recorded two decades earlier, but it was not a verbatim account. 'When we were asked to come we did not know what was wanted', he later recalled, 'but we found it was to be a talk in reference to peyote' (Anonymous 1918: 68). The expert witness knew these bureaucrats wanted to eradicate peyotism; obliged to defend the tradition on short notice, he explained the advent of peyote religion extemporaneously, not by reading from a prepared text. Animated through oral narrative, visual image, ceremonial experience, and social commitment, *Peyote Woman* had found a place in Mooney's life.

Peyote may be the indispensable element of practicing its namesake religion, but the key to understanding and interpreting this tradition is *Peyote Woman*. She is a person in distress, isolated, and grieving to the point of exhaustion. Her overnight ordeal in the wild brings inspiration of a natural remedy and prefigures a nightlong ceremony guiding its use. She rests on a living bed of medicine; at daybreak, she gathers the plant and returns to camp. Tribal elders follow her instructions for the lodge and altar and the prayers and songs that accompany this new sacrament. The first peyote meeting produces a daybreak vision of their lost relations in the Spanish-colonial *Sierra Madre*, the Mother Mountains. A woman gives birth to modern peyote religion.

And there is more to her than a story; her picture appears on one of the oldest artifacts of the tradition. The gourd rattle is an essential instrument of peyote music. It is handmade using materials from birds, animals, plants, and the very earth. The spirited object has been adorned with symbols of natural motion—rain, singing, a bird in flight—and of the organic sacrament, which also denotes the dawning light that signals the close of a peyote meeting. The gourd's dominant icon depicts *Peyote Woman*, recalling her story while schematizing her ceremony as well: this female body is a map of the peyote lodge and altar. Her head is the Chief Peyote, which rests at the midpoint of a crescent mound of earth described by her curving shoulders. Her torso centers the living fire and its growing mantle of ash. Her lower body lies to the east, anticipating the rising of the morning star, which announces her own arrival as *Water Woman*. She is surrounded by a halo of congregants gathered in the tipi, her seat of power since time immemorial. In her left hand she holds a feather fan, another essential ceremonial object, prophesying a time when women will be full participants in the tradition. Narrative, image, and performance are conflated by the gourd rattle, which guides songs to the sacrament and other powers. Myth and ritual merge in the person of *Peyote Woman*.



Nature religion is 'everywhere apparent', wrote Catherine Albanese in the epilogue of her seminal book, but 'it is also a form of religion that slips between the cracks of the usual interpretive grids' (1990: 199). Nature religion 'was lived out by Indian inhabitants' before anyone else settled in America, and an understanding of these and other traditions 'can cast important light on persistent patterns in past and present American life' (1990: 199-200). Moreover, nature religion 'is embodied and enacted, not simply pondered. The study of comparative religions makes it clear that religions are *action* systems as much as—if not more than—they are thought systems' (1990: 200, emphasis in original). Albanese finds nature religion 'not just among the elite but, as much and more, among the democratic many who struggled to name and express it. The homespun quality of what they produced, the do-it-yourself edge to their ideas and practice, should not deter us from acknowledging the seriousness of the religious mentality among nonspecialists' (1990: 201).

In February 1918, Mooney testified yet again on behalf of peyote, this time before a subcommittee of the Committee on Indian Affairs of the House of Representatives. 'It is something used in connection with a certain Indian religion which dates back as far as our knowledge of the Indians in the Spanish territories goes', he said (Mooney 1918: 62). 'Outside of that they do not use it except for distinct medical purposes, in what they consider a medical fashion' (1918: 61). Asked to summarize his professional opinion of indigenous tradition, Mooney was emphatic: 'I favor the continuance of this peyote religion among the Indians', he told the assembled congressmen. 'I speak as I do because I have studied this officially, through many years, and because I know personally these Indians, their feelings, their mentality, and their ceremony' (1918: 111). Peyote 'is a wild plant entirely, so far as I know, a natural wild growth', he added (1918: 112). 'The most that can be said about it, as the Indians use it, is that it clarifies the imagination. That is about the best way of putting it' (1918: 108).

### References

- Albanese, Catherine L. 1990. *Nature Religion in America: From the Algonkian Indians to the New Age* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press).
- Anonymous. 1918. 'Documents, Annual Meeting of the Board of Indian Commissioners, February 4, 1915', in *Peyote: Hearings Before a Subcommittee of the Committee on Indian Affairs of the House of Representatives* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office): 68-88.
- Mooney, James. 1892a. 'Eating the Mescal', *Augusta (GA) Chronicle*, 24 January.
- . 1892b. 'A Kiowa Mescal Rattle', *American Anthropologist* 5.1: 64-65. Doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1525/aa.1892.5.1.02a00090>.



- . 1896. 'The Mescal Plant and Ceremony', *Therapeutic Gazette* 20: 7-11.
- . 1897. 'The Kiowa Peyote Rite', *Der Urquell* 1: 329-33.
- . 1898. 'Calendar History of the Kiowa Indians', in J.W. Powell (ed.), *Seventeenth Annual Report of the Bureau of American Ethnology* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office): 129-440.
- . 1910. 'Peyote', in Frederick Webb Hodge (ed.), *Handbook of American Indians North of Mexico*, vol. 2 (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office): 237.
- . 1911. 'In Kiowa Camps', *Proceedings of the Mississippi Valley Historical Association* 3: 43-57.
- . 1913. 'The Indian Woman', *Collections of the Nebraska State Historical Society* 17: 95-103.
- . 1918. 'Statement of Mr. James Mooney', in *Peyote: Hearings Before a Subcommittee of the Committee on Indian Affairs of the House of Representatives* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office): 59-113.