
A Review of A Culture's Catalyst: Historical Encounters with Peyote and the Native American Church in Canada

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A Culture's Catalyst: Historical Encounters with Peyote and the Native American Church in Canada by Kahan, Fannie, edited by Erika Dyck. 2016. Winnipeg, MB: University of Manitoba Press. 130 pp. Paperback \$27.95. ISBN 978-0887558146

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Fannie Kahan's new book, *A Culture's Catalyst*, provides a novel glimpse into an era when psychedelic research was at its peak, and when social fears about psychedelics were limited to the imagined orgies of peyote cults. Kahan's original manuscript was completed back in 1963, but failed efforts at finding a publisher left the book gathering dust in the archives of the author's brother, Abram Hoffer. The manuscript remained buried in papers until it was uncovered by historian Erika Dyck during investigations on the history of psychedelic research in Canada. Dyck has brought this manuscript to light by editing it for clarity and uniformity, and providing an in-depth introduction contextualizing Kahan's work within the political landscape of the 1950s and early 1960s.

Kahan's book is largely built around a Native American Church peyote ceremony held during 1956 in North Battleford, Saskatchewan. A handful of White scientists attended the ceremony, including book contributors Duncan Blewett, Abram Hoffer, Humphry Osmond, and Teodoro Weckowicz. Kahan, who is a journalist by training, has assembled and presented what might best be characterized as a defense of peyotism, the religious use of peyote, with a text that veers between reporting and editorializing. Kahan draws heavily from anthropologists J. S. Slotkin, Weston LaBarre, and Omer Stewart, but also demonstrates her investigative prowess through her collection of a variety of government documents, ranging from department memos to legislative hearings, and court transcripts and decisions as primary resources. From this research, she provides, as an addendum to chapter three, the full court opinion on the seminal case of *Arizona v. Attakai*, which is the first U.S. court decision to find that the Constitution protects religious peyote use. Kahan also draws on the original research of her collaborators, including various communications with members of the Native American Church.

Kahan provides a brief introduction to the manuscript, then goes on to outline the historical context that gave rise to the peyote religion in the United States (in addition to other Native religious movements that were suppressed), and its eventual spread to Canada in the 1930s. Kahan details several significant legal developments in the U.S. and Canada related to the relationship between Native peoples and their respective federal governments. She also examines a fascinating conflict over peyotism on the Navajo

reservation. As a lawyer, the details of this conflict, leading up to the *Attakai* case, are to me a highlight of the book. Kahan goes on to describe the structure and ethic behind the Native American Church and the peyote ceremony, providing the foundation for the chapters that follow and complete the book.

Humphry Osmond contributes a poetic account of his experience as a participant in the peyote ceremony. The account is notable not only for its visual imagery, but also for its honesty, including disclosing Osmond's fears about "vomiting in public" (69). Duncan Blewett, in chapter 6, examines the psychological benefits provided to Native peoples by peyote and the peyote ceremony, particularly in the aftermath of colonialism and in the reserve and reservation eras. Blewett, a clinical psychologist, participated in the 1956 ceremony, but did not consume peyote. Therefore, much of his discussion and analysis is based on a synthesis of his observations in the peyote ceremony and his clinical work with psychedelics such as LSD and mescaline, the latter being the active component of peyote.

Teodoro Weckowicz provides (perhaps my favorite chapter in the book) an analysis of the peyote ceremony in Jungian terms. Weckowicz outlines Jung's theory on archetypes and the collective unconscious, and draws some provocative parallels with the peyote ceremony. The book closes with a short chapter by Abram Hoffer and Humphry Osmond discussing the recent (1958) classification of peyote as a prescription drug by the Canadian government. Here, they examine the ethical perils, among others, of placing doctors in the role of gatekeeper to a religion's sacrament.

Kahan's book is ambitious, but as a full-throated defense of peyotism it misses the mark, both in terms of tone and content. Kahan herself did not attend the 1956 peyote ceremony, and it is not clear what, if any, experience she has working or interacting with First Nations' or Native American peoples. She strikes a strong tone of support for Native peoples and the peyote religion throughout the book, but the tone is often polemical rather than critical, and frequently veers into generalization and stereotype. As an example of the strange tone, Kahan makes the following statement attempting to emphasize the importance of indigenous religions in helping Native peoples to adapt to post-colonial life; however, she somehow manages to both patronize and romanticize the Native individual in the process: "Hard as he tries to adjust to our ways, the Indian still finds that truth and integrity exist only in himself, the everlasting mystic" (20).

Inartful statements, similar to the previous example, are presented throughout Kahan's work. Sometimes these statements are more clearly supportive of Native peoples and critical of the continuing colonial realities in North America, such as when referring to the "cultural smugness of the White man" (66). Frequently, however, these statements are made without developing the proper context to support them, leaving the delivery acerbic rather than poignant. This practice of stating, rather than demonstrating, takes away from the power of the overall work, and leaves a piece that some might find abrasive. While I generally sympathize with the views of the author, I believe that it is the tone that she struck, rather than the content of the book, that prevented Kahan from finding a publisher in the 1960s.

The organization and cohesiveness of the original manuscript could also be tighter. The introduction by Kahan is brief, and lacks an outline or comprehensive overview of the original manuscript. There is some repetitiveness and overlap between chapters as well. The Introduction to the published book, written by editor Erika Dyck, helps to build a structure around the original manuscript and provides the reader much needed context in terms of the period and the individuals involved in the production of the original manuscript. It is Dyck's contribution, providing a proper foundation, that brings the book together as a satisfactory whole.

As an anthropologist, there is not as much analysis as I would like; however, this is not truly an anthropological work. The book draws heavily from J. S. Slotkin's (1956) ethnography, *The Peyote Religion*, which I would highly recommend as complementary reading. That said, the content, quotes, rare bits of information, and historical value of Kahan's work were enough to keep my interest. All in all, Erika Dyck should be commended for her efforts in reviving Kahan's manuscript. Despite its faults and peculiarities, I believe there are sufficient virtues to merit the interest of the modern reader and researcher.