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PEYOTISM IN THE WEST

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and
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With a Foreword by
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FOREWORD

Known for millenia in its native Mexico as a sacred hallucinogen, peyote (*Lophophora williamsii*), a small, unobtrusive, blue-green spineless cactus of calcareous deserts, with more than 30 alkaloids in its tissues, has, during the last century been accepted by thousands of Indians in the United States and Canada as the central element in a vibrant religious movement legally organized as the Native American Church.

The peyote plant itself and the movement in which it is basically involved has captured the intensive attention of botanists, ethnobotanists, phytochemists, pharmacologists and psychologists; and one of its alkaloids—mescaline, responsible for the brilliantly colored kaleidoscopic visual hallucinations so typical of peyote intoxication—has even found application in psychological research and in psychiatry.

Nowhere, however, has there been interest in peyote and its uses that can equal that accorded peyotism by anthropologists. Scores of monographs and books and literally hundreds of papers have been published concerning this little cactus. Even more has been written on the vertiginous spread of peyotism in the United States. Scholarly studies have attempted to analyze the cultural intricacies involved in the contemporary acceptance of an ancient Mexican hallucinogen wholly foreign to the geographic area of most of the tribes north of the Rio Grande.

One of the most influential anthropological students of peyote and one of the most eloquent and analytical writers on peyotism and its role in the United States is Professor Omer C. Stewart of the University of Colorado. He has devoted his professional life to this absorbing topic. His writings on peyote are numerous and profoundly critical. They

have over the years received high acclaim not only from anthropological circles but from scientists in other contiguous fields of research. If any one word were to be applied to describe his research and writings, that word would be *deep*. No study of American peyotism can possibly be made without constant and thorough examination of Stewart's publications. Especially outstanding are his *Ute Peyotism* and *Washo-Northern Paiute Peyotism: A Study in Acculturation*. Another noteworthy milestone is the monograph written by D. F. Aberle and Stewart: *Navaho and Ute Peyotism: A Chronological and Distributional Study*.

There are several aspects of Stewart's research and writing that have always commanded my admiration.

First: He is imbued with a profound respect and sympathetic understanding of the American Indian, his thinking and his way of life. This characteristic shows up not only throughout his scientific writings but in his vigorous defense of the Indian's religious right to use peyote. This defense more than once he has brought to bear to help thwart unjust missionary opposition and intolerant attitudes of lawmakers in some of the western states. This crusading spirit in favor of religious freedom is exemplified in his powerful paper *Friend to the Ute*.

Second: He views the present state of affairs from a historical perspective—a characteristic that, as an ethnobotanist, I find all too often blatantly ignored in many contemporary anthropological publications. Stewart's regard for the value of history is, of course, extraordinarily evident in his essay: *Historical Notes about Applied Anthropology in the United States*, an essay of unparalleled excellence that should be assigned reading to every student of

anthropology.¹ It is further instanced in his *History of Peyotism in Nevada*.

Third: Stewart always tries to seek the simplest, most direct and most logical explanations. This distinguishing quality seems unfortunately to be rare today among social anthropologists, many of whom appear to search for the most complex and abstruse ways of explaining what in reality often is obvious even to nonspecialists. An excellent example is Stewart's recognition of the Indian's almost universal reverence of peyote as a sacred "medicine" as being in great measure directly responsible for the rapid diffusion of peyotism in the United States.

I am happy to learn that so many of Omer Stewart's major papers are to be republished. They are unavailable, most of them, except in libraries fortunate enough to have the journals in which they appeared. They deserve wider availability and recognition.

It is in addition an honor to be asked to contribute these few words towards the republication of a series of such outstanding anthropological monographs as Stewart's.

I first met Omer Stewart in 1937 when, as a graduate student in the University of California in Berkeley, he visited me in Cambridge. I was then an undergraduate at Harvard, writing my bachelor's honors thesis on *Lophophora williamsii*. I had carried out ethnobotanical field studies among several tribes in Oklahoma with Weston La Barre, then a graduate student at Yale—another world-renowned anthropological specialist on peyote.

Stewart and I had long discussions on various aspects of this hallucinogen and its significance to the Indian. In my laboratory, we even traded peyote songs to the accompaniment of my Kiowa peyote drum. From that early meeting to this day, I have had the greatest respect for him. And although distances and divergent paths of study have permitted us to meet only very occasionally, I have consistently followed his research with the deepest interest.

My early contacts with Omer Stewart—and with Weston La Barre—were strongly influential in orienting my own life-long career into research on hallucinogenic plants used in magico-religious ceremonies throughout the Americas. As a premedical undergraduate, I decided to forego medical school and continue preparations for ethnobotanical research, especially in biodynamic plants employed as medicines, poisons or narcotics. I do not believe that Omer realizes how much he contributed to my change of heart back in 1937.

There is no doubt in my mind that republication in one volume of Stewart's major papers not only represents a tribute to an outstanding scientist but will serve to stimulate new interdisciplinary studies on peyote and peyotism. *Scripta ferunt annos.*

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¹Stewart's essay, found in *Human Organization*, Vol. 42, No. 3, 1983, was originally an acceptance speech on the occasion of receiving the 1983 Malinowski Award presented by the Society for Applied Anthropology in recognition of his efforts to understand and serve the needs of the world through social science.