



Phillip Wewenis, Assistant Director of the Kickapoo Indian Fair and Ceremonial of 1962, and Henry McKinney, Director and Master of Ceremonies. (Courtesy of H. E. Bruce)

Religion or Superstition?

by

E. J. Calkins

The difference between religion and superstition is often a matter of the observer's viewpoint and his prejudices. A discussion or a description of such matters as the beliefs of a people is likely to serve no useful purpose unless one looks for the best and is willing to approach the study with a tolerant understanding and proper historical perspective.

No one who is privileged to watch the ceremonials of our Indian people should do so as a matter of idle entertainment. Few of us — Christian, Jewish, Moslem, or Buddhist — would appreciate or respect a visitor or guest at our religious services if he came to laugh, scorn, or ridicule. In this way we are not different from our Indian brothers.

A graduate student at K.S.T.C. who had spent most of his life among the Kickapoo people tells the following story that happened when he was a boy: "I had just watched for the first time the Kickapoo Green Corn Dance. I knew nothing of the real meaning or significance connected with this reverent thanksgiving ceremonial. I made the embarrassing mistake of trying to make a joke about the performance. A young Kickapoo friend who had just finished his part of the service as a drummer gave me some timely advice. He politely and earnestly helped me to see how crude I had been. Needless to say, I never repeated such a breach of etiquette while watching other ceremonies."

One should not overlook the fact that his own cherished beliefs and religious rituals might seem strange to outsiders. A man made from the dust of the earth, a woman made from a man's rib, fountains filled with blood, even the serpent that exercised evil influence might be startling to those of another faith.

Just so, there are startling things in the beliefs of the Indians from the viewpoint of non-Indians. The Kickapoos are loath to

share their beliefs with outsiders. They have had good reason to be shocked by the behavior of ignorant, idly curious and thoughtless persons who have failed to allow them the privilege of sanctity.

A brilliant, gracious, well-educated Kickapoo girl, now a devout Catholic, recently expressed her feeling about the religious beliefs of her people: "I have danced their dances in full costume, I have felt all the ecstasy and reverence of their religion which they express and participate in so fervently by movement. I *could* go back to the ways of my people. I see nothing harmful in their beliefs, and because of the sacred nature of the religious beliefs of my people, I do not wish to talk about them." This is a typical Kickapoo reaction to anyone who questions them about the old beliefs.

A quarter of a century ago, a member of the Kickapoo tribe gave the following brief account of some of their religious beliefs:

"The Indians of earlier days were what we may term 'children of nature.' Although they were sometimes savage and cruel, they had a keen intelligence, which, of course, was not directed to the same ends as that of the non-Indians. As we all know, the Indians were finally divided into hundreds of tribes who scattered over all parts of the country. The customs of each tribe vary a great deal, but I will attempt to describe a few of the many beliefs of my own tribe.

"One of the religions which outsiders regard as most superstitious has as its basis the drum. A large drum belongs to a certain family, and is handed down from generation to generation in that family. Each family has a group of individuals who belong to this drum. The Indians believe that this drum should never be left alone. Any persons (who are 'approved') may join this clan and belong to a certain drum. On the drum are many designs which are symbolic, such as a yellow stripe that extends through the center, representing the narrow road to be travelled in this life.

"According to the Kickapoo beliefs, meetings must be held often to commemorate their dead. At these meetings a drum feast is held. Usually it takes the place of a supper. Before anyone can partake of the food, a small portion of each food is taken and put on hot coals by each member who wishes to participate in this ritual, in order to feed his own dead.

"Another interesting practice of the people occurs in their funerals. They drum all night, thinking that they are accompany-

ing the dead safely to his destination. Before the dead is finally put away, a wooden bowl with some food and a wooden dipper is put into the coffin to keep the spirit from starving before reaching the end of his journey. As the ceremony finally draws to a close, the coffin is placed in the grave with the head to the west. They believe their light from the Divine comes with the rising sun, and as the spirit rises to go to the east it will not have to turn around but can keep going straight. Deceased warriors are painted with a red streak down the forehead and chin so that the Great Spirit will know that one of his chosen people is coming.

"The Indians also worship an herb called peyote. The typical place for worship is away from the atmosphere of their own homes. They erect a place similar to a wigwam. They believe they will be in greater favor with the Divine if they get away from their own homes to a place especially constructed for the ceremony.

"The principal element in a meeting of this type is the peyote. This herb resembles a dried peach with fuzz in the center, and it is very gritty. The Indians secure this herb from Texas and Mexico. Some prefer to eat it as it is, and others prefer a tea made from it.

"The Indians remain drumming and singing all night. Certain periods of the night are set apart for eating and drinking. After they have received the blessings from their Divine (or this peyote), they rejoice and thank their beloved Divine by serving sweets such as candy, fruit, artichokes, and parched corn. As we all know these last two may be classed as Indian foods. They serve these as a special gift from their Divine.

"Among all the races of the world we find a certain class of people who are very superstitious. On investigation we find that this class is either uneducated or that they are greatly influenced by their own surroundings. A group of this kind in our tribe are the medicine men. They perform their ceremony like the people do who worship peyote, only their belief is based on the Indian medicines which they use. This group of worshippers fast for four days and after that they believe they receive a blessing from the Spirit. Before they can start their fasting they must have a token for which they work. They firmly believe that their own Divine answers their devotion by fulfilling their wishes.

"Another belief that exists among some of the Indians of today is found in the Kennekuk Church. A savior is expected, and his name will be Kennekuk. At these meetings Indian songs are sung, prayers are offered, and preaching is done. In about the

half of the Indian songs the small children follow a leader and they shake hands with everyone. After the children finish the older people begin. Their belief is that they thank their Divine for the power of movement. In their funerals, in some cases, a characteristic ritual is performed. Before the body is taken out of the church, anyone who is near to the dead person may go up and shake hands, or occasionally relatives may kiss the person. By this they believe a message may be sent to the deceased of their own family.

"Anyone that stops to reason on the question of superstition will immediately understand that superstitions do not mingle with education. One of the best examples offered by our tribe is the existence of 'whippers,' as they are termed. Although this practice does not exist at present, the belief in the old days was that a few men among the people, who were appointed by the people, were thought to be ordained angels. These men were equipped with switches made by whittling the inside of a hickory stick. They visited the Indian homes every Saturday. Their purpose was to decide from the parents' account of the children's behavior during the preceding week whether the children needed punishment. In some cases they decided to whip. In other cases they gave a lecture. Children were also praised by the whippers if their conduct had been above reproach. The whippers were highly respected, and whenever they entered any Indian homes, they were shown greater courtesies than the ordinary person would receive.

"Tobacco was early introduced by the Indians, and to them it was indeed a sacred gift of the Divine. Today it is used outside of ceremonies by almost all the older generation. It used to be that a person particularly designated as a medicine man was called upon for medical aid. Before he even considered the case, he had to be offered a piece of tobacco. After he received this gift, he performed his duty. A dinner and certain gifts were then offered to him as pay. Tobacco in such cases as this was used as a request rather than in a ceremony."