Exhibiting Heritage: The Native American Church Observes a Centennial

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This project report was accepted for publication on February 3, 2022.

Abstract
This project report discusses the 2018 Centennial Commemoration of the Native American Church State of Oklahoma (NAC-OK). Chartered in 1918 the NAC-OK is an intertribal organization dedicated to the protection of the First Amendment rights of its members to use peyote as a holy sacrament. The Centennial Committee of the NAC-OK invited the University of Oklahoma’s Sam Noble Museum to collaborate on an interpretive exhibition on the history of the NAC-OK. The Committee and the museum employed a methodology grounded in shared authority to integrate community driven content with established museum processes for exhibition development. This approach allowed the museum to produce the exhibition through the museum’s established workflow while privileging community interpretation and design.

Keywords
commemorations; indigenous religion; museum exhibitions; social history | Oklahoma; Great Plains; North America.

Competing Interests
The authors declare no competing interests.

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Introduction

On the morning of October 10, 1918, representatives from the Apache, Cheyenne, Comanche, Kiowa, Oto, and Ponca tribal nations emerged from a tipi at the rural home of Bob Cook near Calumet, Oklahoma, USA. The tribal representatives gathered the previous evening to participate in a peyote religious service, praying throughout the night for the future of their religion. That morning they traveled from Calumet to the County Courthouse in El Reno, Oklahoma, to file an application to charter the Native American Church as a formal religious organization, according to the laws and regulations of the State of Oklahoma. Their action marks the culmination of a long history of efforts among Peyotists in Oklahoma to secure legal protection for the religious use of peyote as a holy sacrament, in accordance with the First Amendment of the US Constitution.1 The Native American Church State of Oklahoma (NAC-OK) has served the needs of hundreds of thousand members and provided a model for numerous additional Native American Church organizations in the United States, Canada, and Mexico.

The intense effort to gain a federal anti-peyote bill in 1918 prompted greater communication and cooperation among Peyotists and brought them into contact with
sympathetic non-Indians, including anthropologists from the Smithsonian Institution. Several ethnologists from the Bureau of American Ethnology offered testimony before Congress citing the positive benefits of Peyotism that they witnessed in Native American communities (US Congress 1918, 59–76, 113–20). After a series of intertribal conferences and consultations with James Mooney, a Smithsonian ethnologist, the Native American Church gained a charter from the State of Oklahoma, giving new strength to the efforts of Peyotists to protect their freedom to practice their religion (Slotkin 1956, 136–37). Today a number of formal organizations, including the Native American Church of the United States, the Native American Church of North America, the NAC-OK, the Azeé Bee Nahaghá of Diné Nation (Native American Church of Navajoland) and numerous state and local chapters account for over 250,000 registered members (Smith and Snake 1996, 172; Slotkin 1956, 57–88; Stewart 1987, 214, 217–19).²

Despite the attainment of a legal charter, the Native American Church experienced near constant assault throughout the twentieth century from local, state, and federal officials.³ Anthropologists have consistently supported the Native American Church and the religious rights of its members. Major figures in twentieth-century North American anthropology provided testimony and lobbied on behalf of Peyotists. This distinguished roster includes Franz Boas, John P. Harrington, John F. Harrington, M. R. Harrington, Aleš Hrdlička, Alfred L. Kroeber, Weston La Barre, Francis La Flesche, David P. McAllester, Truman Michelson, James Mooney, Vincenzo Petrullo, Richard E. Schultes, J. S. Slotkin, Elna Smith, Omer C. Stewart, and Sol Tax (Stewart 1987, xv, 219, 238, 242).

The concept of a centennial commemoration began to circulate informally in the summer of 2015 and in June 2016 the NAC-OK formally recognized the authority of a Centennial Committee to act as a separate body to plan an appropriate commemoration of the anniversary. Annette Arkeketa (Figure 1) and Eugene Blackbear Jr. served as co-chairs of the committee with Eloise Rice as treasurer. The core committee consisted of twelve to fifteen members with additional assistance from NAC-OK chapters throughout the state of Oklahoma.⁴

The Executive Board of the NAC-OK envisioned the commemoration as a reverent and respectful event that emphasized the insight and efforts of the founding members. The Centennial Committee endeavored to temper the inherent celebratory nature of a centennial to foster a spirit of thanksgiving and hope for continued religious freedom. The Committee worked over the ensuing two years to plan and fund the commemoration. They partnered with members of tribal chapters of the NAC-OK to sponsor a range of fund-raising initiatives, including benefit dances, raffles, food sales, and direct donations. These efforts successfully funded all the direct expenses of the commemoration including groceries and cooks for the large communal meals, rentals, ceremonial materials, and Committee giveaways. The Committee also assisted with travel costs for out-of-state participants and honored guests.

**Developing the Exhibition**

In May 2018 the NAC-OK Centennial Committee invited the Sam Noble Museum to collaborate on an interpretive exhibition for display at the commemoration. The relationship between the Sam Noble Museum and NAC-OK builds on the museum’s history of community-focused projects separate from its public exhibition and pro-
Figure 1. Annette Arkeketa, Co-chair of the NAC-OK Centennial Committee. Cheyenne Arapaho Tribal Campus, Concho, Oklahoma. October 8, 2018. Photograph by Daniel C. Swan.
gram agenda. The ability to access funding through existing budgets at the Sam Noble Museum for community heritage projects was a critical factor in our ability to undertake these projects. The Departments of Ethnology and Native American Languages at the museum embrace various forms of engaged scholarship in their research and service programs (Fitzgerald and Linn 2013; Jordan and Swan 2011; Linn and Torralba 2012; Linn 2014; Maxwell, Anderson and Heaton 2017; Swan and Minnis 2014).\(^5\)

The NAC-OK centennial exhibition was developed using a practice grounded in shared authority and decision-making. The Sam Noble Museum views this as a collaborative process specific to each project (Swan and Jordan 2015; Swan and Linn 2021). Principal partners in this collaboration were Swan, representing the Sam Noble Museum, Annette Arkeketa, Charlie Haag and Eloise Rice from the NAC-OK Centennial Committee and the officers of the six original chapters of the NAC-OK.\(^6\)

The development of the exhibition was initiated with a series of meetings to discuss the concept and objectives of the exhibition. The intent of the NAC-OK Committee was clear—they wished to portray the Native American Church as an association of local communities, as opposed to a formal, bureaucratic organization. The exhibition would consist of seven panels, a title panel (Figure 2) and one for each of the tribal nations that sponsored the original charter of the NAC-OK. Members from the NAC-OK exhibition sub-committee traveled to meet with representatives from the six tribal chapters to discuss the exhibition project. The content of each panel was determined by the NAC chapters and emphasized the advent and development of the Peyote Religion in their communities.

The exhibition and graphic design staff at the Sam Noble Museum worked with the exhibition subcommittee of the NAC-OK to develop a general design for the exhibit. This included review of design drafts and decisions regarding layout, color scheme, and fonts for titles and text. We cannot over emphasize the importance of the ability to share digital copies of design iterations via email to expedite the process. This is not always possible given the limited broadband connectivity in rural Oklahoma.

The museum collaborated with the NAC-OK Centennial Committee to design and produce a program for the commemoration event that features original artwork by Michael Elizondo and Charles Haag, Jr. The program provided a schedule of events and acknowledgment of the individuals, organizations, and communities that supported the funding of the commemoration. Production of the exhibition and program conformed to the established process used at the museum and flowed through the departmental work order system. Daniel C. Swan provided budget and production management and coordinated critical deadlines among project partners.

The museum worked with the officers of the NAC-OK to rehouse the original 1918 charter and articles of incorporation for display at the commemoration (Figure 3). The exhibition included a proclamation from the Governor of Oklahoma designating October 10, 2018, as Native American Church Day in Oklahoma. The Ponca Chapter produced a tabletop display that expanded on the history of the NAC in their community. At the close of the commemoration event the tribal panels were given to the respective chapters for potential display in their communities and the title panel was donated to the NAC-OK for display at the Rollin Haag, Sr. NAC Center in Concho, Oklahoma.
Figure 2. Title panel from the NAC-OK Centennial exhibition. Design by Michael Elizondo. This graphic was also used on the cover of the commemoration program, and on t-shirts sold at the event as a fundraising endeavor. Photograph by Daniel C. Swan.
Charlie Haag, President of the NAC-OK, and representing Cheyenne Chapter, Number 1, referenced the exhibit in his comments at the Centennial program on October 9, 2018:

I’m certain that my grandfather and all the men who are over here on these placards [pointing to the exhibit organized by the Centennial Committee and the Sam Noble Museum], all these names, these representatives, these different tribes—I’m certain that they mentioned us, without knowing our names, asking the Good Lord to have mercies on us and have pity on us, that we will be able to try our best to carry this to this point.

Haag’s comments emphasize the important role of individuals in these local histories, ascribing agency to their presence in the exhibition. His perseverance to facilitate a religious service on the allotment of Bob Cook, despite severe weather constraints, speaks to his respect for the founders of the NAC-OK.

The Commemoration

The Centennial Commemoration of the NAC-OK was a two-day event beginning on Tuesday, October 9, 2018. The Commemoration was held on the campus of the Cheyenne and Arapaho Tribes in Concho, Oklahoma. The Cheyenne and Arapaho Tribes served as the formal hosts for the event, providing space for the ceremonial tipis, use
of the community center for meals and programs, and facilities to support camping by family members and other supporters. The tribe also donated a buffalo from their herd to support the communal meals of the commemoration.

Michael Burgess, a member of the planning committee, served as master of ceremonies for the event. The program began with a prayer offered by Lonnie Emhoola, and the presentation of the colors by the Cheyenne Arapaho & American Legion Post 401 honor guard. Chris Benge, Oklahoma State Secretary of Indian Affairs, then presented the NAC-OK with a proclamation from Governor Mary Fallin, designating October 10, 2018, as Native American Church Day in the State of Oklahoma. The preliminary program concluded with a hearty welcome from Reggie Wassana, Governor of the Cheyenne and Arapaho Tribes of Oklahoma. Those in attendance were then invited to enjoy a sumptuous buffet brunch provided by the Centennial Committee.7

The program resumed with comments from the current presidents of the six tribal nations that signed the original NAC-OK charter. These individuals (Figure 4) offered wonderful narratives from the history of the Native American Church in their communities. They spoke of the unity of purpose that the church represents and their desire that the NAC-OK might celebrate a second centennial. The program continued with informational presentations by Linda Benally, past president of the National

Figure 4. Chapter presidents, Native American Church State of Oklahoma, Concho, Oklahoma, October 9, 2018. They represent the communities that filed the original charter. (L-R) Master of Ceremony, Michael Burgess, Comanche Nation; Charles Haag, Cheyenne Chapter 1; Richard Banderas, Apache Chapter; Gary White Cloud, Oto Chapter; Lonnie Emhoola, Kiowa Chapter; Billy Komahcheet, Comanche Chapter; and Oliver Littlecook, Ponca Chapter. Photograph by Daniel C. Swan.
Native American Bar Association and Miriam Volat, Executive Director of the Indigenous Peyote Conservation Initiative (IPCI). As people finished eating, the Centennial Committee recognized individuals and organizations that supported the fundraising initiatives of the committee. The program concluded with comments and a prayer from Charlie Haag, President of the NAC-OK. Individuals who planned to participate in religious services later in the evening gathered at the community center at 5:00 p.m. for an evening meal.  

On the morning of October 10, 2018, members of the NAC-OK emerged from nine tipis (Figure 5), following a night of prayer to give thanks for one hundred years of legal protection for their religion. At noon the parishioners, additional NAC-OK members, family, friends, and guests gathered at the community center for a noon meal, the customary conclusion of a Native American Church religious service. The Centennial Committee conducted a formal Southern Plains Give Away ceremony to acknowledge the individuals and organizations that supported and contributed to their efforts to plan, fund, and deliver the Centennial Commemoration.

**Conclusion**

The collaboration between the Sam Noble Museum and the Centennial Committee of the NAC-OK was a truly unique experience and we are proud to have contributed to this important event. The project advanced the museum’s mission by engaging an
important constituency through a temporary exhibition installed in a community setting. The process we employed is anchored in the museum’s commitment to collaborative research, publication, and exhibition initiatives to support community heritage agendas. This collaboration reaffirmed community partnerships from past endeavors and fostered new relationships for future projects. Our experience underscores the importance of embracing opportunities to realize museological practice in diverse community contexts.

**Acknowledgements**

The authors greatly appreciate the invitation from the NAC-OK to collaborate on the centennial exhibition project. We wish to thank Annette Arkeketa, Charlie Haag and Eloise Rice for their leadership in the development of the exhibition. The willingness of the members of NAC-OK Chapters to share family photographs and histories greatly enhanced the exhibition. Chudak would like to thank Annette Arkeketa for her assistance with his thesis research.

**Notes**

1. See Slotkin (1956, 57–8, 134–36) for discussion of these early efforts among Peyotists in Oklahoma to organize in defense of their religious freedom. Native American Church State of Oklahoma (NAC-OK) is the current official name of the organization more commonly still referred to as the Native American Church of Oklahoma.

2. Membership in the Native American Church is difficult to estimate. The number of active practitioners and supporters is substantially larger than the formal membership of the various Native American Church organizations. The formal membership of the Native American Church is best viewed as representatives of extended families and local communities.

3. See Smith and Snake (1996) for treatment of recent legal challenges to the religious use of peyote by members of the Native American Church.

4. Blackbear invited Swan to join the Centennial Committee in July 2016.

5. Our work with the NAC-OK Centennial Committee embraces the concept of “mindful museum practice,” an effort to redefine the proper roles of museums through expanded social awareness and innovative modes of public service (Janes 2012, 514). Our work also accesses the theory and practice of “tactical museologies” (Buntinx and Karp 2007, 208–9) working to move the primary focus of the Sam Noble Museum from galleries and collections to programs and public outreach. The ultimate goal of this methodology is the transformation of the modernist museum to a post-museum that emphasizes the intangible heritage of communities, in this case the history of the NAC-OK (Buntinx and Karp 2007, 217; Hooper-Greenhill 2000, 152; Weil 1999, 243, 254).

6. As an anthropologist employed at university museums, Swan enjoyed consistent opportunities to mentor students through teaching, internships, and research opportunities with emphasis on community engagement. Aleksandr Chudak conducted a multi-sited ethnography of “commemorative” events associated with the NAC-OK for his MA thesis in Anthropology at the University of Oklahoma. His research explores the relationship between sovereignty and heritage as expressed in these commemoration events. See Chudak (2019).
7. The public programs of the Commemoration were live streamed by Cheyenne-Arapaho Television and some footage is archived on their Facebook™ page (Cheyenne-Arapaho Television 2018a).
8. Charlie Haag’s comments on the NAC-OK centennial are summarized in this community program note from Cheyenne Arapaho Television (2018b).

References Cited


Daniel C. Swan is Curator for Ethnology emeritus at the Sam Noble Oklahoma Museum of Natural History and Professor of Anthropology emeritus at the University of Oklahoma. Among other works, he is the author of Peyote Religious Art: Symbols of Faith and Belief (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1999) and (with Jim Cooley) Wedding Clothes and the Osage Community: A Giving Heritage (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2019).

Aleksandr Chudak earned a Master of Arts degree in anthropology at the University of Oklahoma in 2019. His thesis documented the centennial commemorative activities of the Native American Church that were held in Oklahoma during 2018. He currently teaches English and works as a translator in Moscow, Russia.