

MARY POAFYPYBITTY

1895-1984



SANAPIA, COMANCHE MEDICINE WOMAN

Sanapia was a Comanche medicine woman, believed to be the last Comanche Eagle Doctor, influenced by traditional Comanche medicine and incorporating elements of Christianity and Peyotism.

Mary Poafypibitty was born in May 1895 near Fort Sill, Oklahoma Territory. Her mother was a traditional Comanche-Arapaho while her father embraced Christianity, and turned his back on his Comanche heritage. She was also raised with the help of her maternal grandmother, who made sure Mary learned the old ways and stories. Both her mother and maternal uncle were Eagle Doctors, who identified the eagle as their source of power.

At seven, Mary began attending Cache Creek Mission School, her first contact with white society. At fourteen, Mary left school and spent the next three years acquiring the knowledge of an eagle doctor. During the first year, her mother taught her about herbal medicines – where to collect them, how to prepare medicines from them, and finally how to administer them to patients. After she had mastered these skills, she was educated in diagnosing illnesses and their proper treatment. The final and important stage of her training was the transfer of supernatural powers to her from her teacher.

The transfer of the powers could only begin when four of Mary's relatives deemed her ready. They included her mother, maternal uncle, maternal grandmother, and paternal grandfather. Her uncle's approval was the most hard-won. Mary fell ill during an influenza epidemic, and her uncle, while treating her, explained that she would never recover unless she committed herself wholly to becoming a healer. Frightened for her life, she promised him that she would be a good woman and a good doctor. Her uncle gave her a new name – Sanapia meaning "Memory Woman" – so she could never forget her promise. He then announced that she was ready to receive powers from her mother.

The transfer of powers occurred through a series of rituals. Her mother explained that through these ceremonies she had placed an eagle feather in Sanapia's mouth and an eagle egg in her stomach. Sanapia would now take on certain traits of the eagle that she would need to be a doctor. The transfer concluded with a four-day-and-night rite, during which Sanapia was sent alone to an isolated home nightly. After her training, her family held a great feast in her honor and gave her presents but she wouldn't be allowed to treat patients until she had gone through menopause.

During this time, Sanapia married three times. First, there was a loveless marriage to a friend of her brother that included having a son. Her second marriage produced a son and daughter but her husband died when she was 35. Following his death, Sanapia drank and gambling, and engaged in promiscuous sex. In 1945 nearing fifty, she successfully cured her niece, drawing on her Eagle medicine training, along with strong prayer. She married for third time, and after menopause, she began her healing practice.

Sanapia's medicine kit included both botanical and non-botanical medicines. Her most important medicine was peyote. She was particularly adept at healing facial paralysis, now known as Bell's palsy. By the 1960s, she was last surviving Comanche Eagle Doctor. Concerned that she wouldn't be able to pass on her powers before dying, she allowed anthropologist David E. Jones to write an account of her life and healing powers. Her medicine power needed to be transferred to a family member – and her children weren't interested – so she adopted Jones and instructed him about her medicines and treatments.

Sanapia died in January 1984 at age 88. Her activities were documented in Jones' book "Sanapia, Comanche Medicine Woman".