

Peyote has a long history of use as a medicinal and sacramental herb. Prehistoric trade in and knowledge of the sacred cactus was apparently well established prior to the European conquest of Mexico. At that time, Spanish Inquisitors declared its use to be a punishable crime against God. Ironically, native peyotists, relying on the humble cactus for divine guidance and inspiration, became targets of oftentimes ruthless evangelism.

As in the case of Teonanacatl, the sacred mushrooms of MesoAmerica, the fact that the peyote religion continues to exist despite centuries of persecution is a testament to its importance in the spiritual lives of many.

Sacred Cactus

Peyote (*Lophophora williamsii*) is a small (less than 12 cm in diameter), round cactus with fuzzy tufts instead of spines. It rarely rises more than an inch or so above the soil surface. The largest part of the cactus is actually underground in the long, carrot-like root. The above ground portion is the "button" which is cut and consumed either fresh or dried. Usually, anywhere from four, to a dozen buttons, are eaten or made into tea. Myths concerning the presence of strychnine in the flesh or fuzz of are often circulated in the common lore, but this substance is completely absent from peyote.

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In addition to commercial harvesting, large sections of the "peyote gardens" of Texas are uprooted for new grazing land with much of the small, slow growing cacti such as peyote, being destroyed as a result. Consequently, the regions where peyote may be found have greatly diminished. Areas where peyote once flourished in commercially harvestable quantities are now very often lacking this cactus entirely.

Peyote is something of an alkaloid factory, producing upwards of 50 chemically related compounds. The effects experienced after consuming this unique medicine range from a feeling of physical energy and well being when taken in small amounts (though this is often preceded by a brief period of lethargy), to actual visionary experience when larger quantities are consumed. Often, individuals may experience stomach discomfort or nausea during the first few hours though this is not always the case. Noticeable psychic effects usually last 10 hours or so after they begin. Experienced peyotists recognize and welcome the feeling of the medicine working with them as a spiritual and physical blessing.

The positive, life enhancing benefits of the peyote medicine are probably as diverse as the many people who have found it to play an extremely important role in their lives.

The Peyote Religion

The religious use peyote is very ancient. One cache of dried peyote found in a Texas cave, has been dated at approximately 7000 years old. The use of peyote in ceremonies among Mexican tribes was a well established tradition by the time of the European entrance into the continent. This pre-historical religious use eventually diffused into the North American regions. Along with this evangelistic migration came changes in the basic ceremonies associated with peyote.

Mexican peyotism is perhaps best typified by the traditional practices of the Huichol tribe of the Sierra Occidental, along the pacific coast of Mexico. Annual pilgrimages to ritually hunt the sacred cactus are still a central part of tribal myth and ceremony. A group leader, or Mara-a- 'kame leads the humble seekers in their mythical quest "...to find our life.", as it has been said. Only peyote gathered in this ceremonial way is suitable for the spiritual requirements of the tribe. The Cora and Tarahumara are related groups of people who use peyote in religious ceremony. Cora people are known to trade for, or purchase peyote from their Huichol neighbors, as their own traditions do not require the desert pilgrimage to collect the sacrament.

In the mid 1800's, simultaneous with native genocide, the peyote religion spread north, arriving at a time when indigenous people were badly in need of spiritual uplifting and cultural strength. In the last 100 years, the spread of peyotism has been prolific.

The peyote ceremony which was introduced to the American Plains Indians is a formalized, all-night prayer meeting, usually held in a teepee, hogan, or peyote house especially set aside for that purpose. Christian elements are often significantly present, depending on the particular tribe or group leader. Most of North American peyotism can be properly identified with the Native American Church (NAC), a large, oftentimes un-associated group of mostly native believers. There are numerous divisions of the NAC (NAC of North America, NAC of Navajoland, NAC of S. Arizona, etc.), with each division being composed of several local chapters, or moons. Each chapter normally has officers who are trained in distinct clerical functions of the church. The leader of a peyote meeting is known as the Road Chief, or Road Man. This is the person who is charged with the responsibility of overseeing the main elements of the meeting and leading others on the Peyote Road, the way of learning to live life well. Other offices include Cedar Chief, Fire Chief, Drum Chief, and often, Earth Mother or Morning Water Woman. Though ceremonies among different chapters tend to vary slightly, many common elements are present in most NAC ceremonies. An eagle bone whistle, various feather fans, water drum, and prayer staff, are a few of the ceremonial items necessary to conduct the prayer meeting. Central tenets of the NAC usually involve avoidance of alcohol, devotion to family, and right living in general.

Probably the most simple, and possibly historically primitive, form of peyotism is the vision quest, alone in nature. Usually this involves fasting, solitude, and quiet but steady contemplation. ~~Peyote is eaten or consumed as a tea and a vigil is kept until such~~ time as the communicant comes to a sense of physical and spiritual completion. This way of experiencing the personal qualities of the experience sounds very much like traditional stories of the first person who was given peyote by Creator Spirit. Several tribes relate the story of a man or woman lost in the desert. Their wandering leaves them exhausted, starving, and dehydrated. Just at the point of giving up all hope of life comes a voice which instructs them to reach out and take hold of the soft and cool plant which grows just within reach of their outstretched hands. They are then told to eat it to quench their thirst for water, food, and guidance back to their home.

Native/Non-Native Use

The Native American Church (NAC) and its various sub-groups, has become the most well known form of the peyote religion. Prior to the 1900's, the ceremonial use of peyote was more strictly limited to the areas of its natural growth, i.e. the Chihuahuan Desert. The Tarahumara and Huichol peoples are well known for their traditional use of peyote, as they live near or travel to areas where it grows abundantly.

The evangelistic spread of what is commonly called Peyotism is well documented in works by Omer Stewart and others. (See "Peyote Religion: A History", by Omer C. Stewart, 1987, University of Oklahoma Press.) The old peyote complex of Mexico spread north by peyote evangelists from the growing regions influencing the botanical medicine kit of their northern brethren. Soon thereafter, individuals such as Quanah Parker, (son of captured homesteader Cynthia Ann Parker and a Comanche chief), and John Wilson, a Caddo medicine man, became peyote missionaries to North American tribes and cultures.

Aside from North American peyotism being an inter-tribal affair, as documented by Stewart, there have at times been mixed or all-race NAC groups, anglo-american and afro-american groups or members. Most NAC chapters allow membership by sincere individuals of various genetic or cultural makeup. Some of the most influential leaders or supporters of NAC peyotism have been people of mixed or European descent. (J. Wilson, Q. Parker, O.C. Stewart, J.S. Slotkin and others.) In order to clarify the issue of multi-ethnic religious use of peyote I offer the following excerpt from Stewart's "Peyote Religion: A History":

"An unusual case of harassment under the Drug Control Act took place in Grand Forks, North Dakota, in October, 1984, when a white couple, Mr. and Mrs. John D. Warner, were arrested by the FBI for possessing peyote, a controlled drug. The two were members of the NAC of Tokio, North Dakota, and had been for a number of years, and Mrs. Warner was custodian of the supply of peyote for the Tokio congregation. The FBI had learned of the possession of peyote by the Warners from the president of the NAC of NA (North America) Emerson Jackson (Navajo), so it was he who brought them to trial. Jackson said that they were not bona fide members of the NAC because they were not

Indians. He maintained that in 1982 a motion had been passed by the NAC of NA to the effect that membership in that organization be limited to persons with one-quarter Indian blood, thereby excluding this white couple. A jury in Grand Forks Federal Court found the defendants innocent of breaking the law, since they were able to prove that although they were not Indians, nevertheless they were members in good standing of the local congregation of peyotists. The charges were dismissed.

This case not only illustrates harassment under the Drug Control Act, but it also brings up the legality of non-Indians as bona fide members of the NAC. From the beginning, attendance of non-Indians to peyote meetings has been a somewhat personal or tribal matter. For instance, very early in Oklahoma some Caddo refused to allow non-Indians to attend any of their meetings. But others, such as the Kiowa and Comanche, welcomed non-Indians, black or white, as long as they were seriously interested.

With the formation of the NAC, the same attitude has generally prevailed, and the presence of non-Indians has been no problem. It was in the sixties when the hippie generation became interested in peyote and became a nuisance in the peyote gardens of Texas, bringing about the Texas law which forbids possession of peyote by persons not having one-quarter Indian blood and proof of membership in the NAC, that race became an issue in membership. Since then, if non-Indians wish to be allowed to possess peyote, they must show that their involvement in the peyote religion is genuine -that is that it is not just a recreational, frivolous, or passing interest but a real commitment. Then, as the case against the Warners shows, race is not an issue. Still, it is especially important for non-Indians to carry identification of membership in the NAC if they have occasion to carry peyote, and even so, non-Indians possessing peyote violate Texas law.

The ruling of the NAC of NA that only Indians should be enrolled in the Native American Church is new and is not shared by most peyotists. The NAC of NA does not speak for all peyotists, as much as it would like to do so. All peyotists consider themselves members of the Native American Church, but most are not affiliated with the NAC of NA. Each congregation makes its own rules, just as each meeting is conducted by its own roadman.

The internal strife within the NAC from 1956 to 1972 which swirled around Frank Takes Gun did not end with his eclipse. Divisiveness has become as much a characteristic of the peyote religion as it is of other religions. Today there are many peyote churches which have little to do with the NAC of NA. Some are large with wide jurisdiction; others are a single congregation."

The reason I have taken the space to allow Stewart's elucidation is to point out the occasional difficulties in the sharing and practices of the peyote religion. Acceptance of the NAC by the surrounding culture, legislature, and even tribal America, has been a gradual and complex process. Unfortunately, misinformation has often been used in a purposefully demeaning way in order to argue against the practice and practitioners of the peyote way, Indian or non-Indian. The NAC was instituted by the courageous and purposeful work of individuals experienced in the Creator's Grace bestowed by peyote.

Despite this, individual and often unaffiliated, legitimate peyotists often face potential or active discriminatory prejudice by virtue of their beliefs.

Recently, more concern has properly been directed toward conserving the plant that is the essential Sacrament of peyotists. (see " The Peyote Gardens of Southern Texas: A Conservation Crisis?", "Cactus and Succulent Journal, Vol. 67/1995, by Dr. Edward F. Anderson) Again I quote Dr. Stewart;

"The main problem today facing the Native American Church in whatever manner of organization is the present reduction in the supply of peyote. The original peyote gardens which furnished such a plentiful and inexpensive supply to the Indians of Oklahoma in the last century are becoming depleted."

Also;

"Another way to increase the supply of peyote would be to cultivate it. This would be expensive, necessitating greenhouses if it were not cultivated in the area of natural growth. Again, this would necessitate changes in the law, for at present it is unlawful to cultivate it, even in a greenhouse. As for the area of natural growth in Texas, all of the land is privately owned. Generally it is used for ranching, but there is still some oil activity. Recently viticulture has been attempted in the area with some success.

And so the future of the little cactus, the essential ingredient of peyotism, its sacrament, is still in doubt."

Actually several states do not prohibit the cultivation of peyote specifically (though federal law might apply), rather, most prohibit its possession outside of a religious context.

Natural Populations of Peyote in Decline

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need for preservation efforts in its native habitat, is the responsibility of those people who honor the divine cactus to cultivate it. This is a tangible way of establishing a close relationship with the plant while helping to preserve the genetic diversity and well-being of the species.

Cultivation

Private collections of the living peyote cactus, (*Lophophora williamsii*), are usually kept as a labor of love or even in the form of an altar or earth shrine. The Huichol people of Mexico often maintain live peyote, captured in the "hunt" of their ancestral pilgrimage. Several Texas peyoteros, (licensed peyote dealers), keep a peyote garden for veneration by those who arrive in person to purchase their sacrament. It is also not uncommon for members of the various Native American Church chapters to keep peyote growing in or around their homes. A surprising number of unassociated individuals cultivate peyote.

One of the leading academic publications for cacti and succulent enthusiasts inserts occasional reminders that peyote is technically illegal in private and institutional collections. In the United States this would appear to be so, except in the case of a bona fide religious context such as the practitioner who keeps a home garden or altar. In the Southwestern U.S., private collections are not as rare as one might think. Also, many international collections exist, many of which are commercially tended for their value to cacti and seed buyers.

Now, however, this usually slow growing and ethno/spiritually important plant, finds itself in a tenuous situation throughout the areas of Southern Texas where it was once plentiful. The importance of what are usually private, if not secretive collections of peyote, is only now becoming clear. (See "The Peyote Gardens' of Southern Texas: A Conservation Crisis?," by Dr. Edward F. Anderson, *Cactus and Succulent Journal* Vol. 67, 1995)

Peyote grows from either seed or clonal offshoots, often called pups, which often re-grow from the roots of harvested plants. Older, uncut specimens also produce pups from their base.

Seed grown peyote is a precious and small crop for the first several years. In natural conditions, plants may take 4 or more years to reach dime-size. Under optimal conditions however, growth is considerably faster. The earliest one may expect harvestable-size plants (3 inches or so in diameter) from seed is about five years, much like the length of time involved in planting and eating fruit.

Peyote seeds should be gently and evenly tamped into a fine, washed sand and soil combination, preferably with a slightly alkaline ph. (7.5 to 8, add lime if needed.) A small board works well for pressing seeds into soil so that the tops are even with soil surface. Keep moist and in indirect natural light.(or under grow lights) At 80 deg F., seeds should sprout well within two weeks.

An excellent sprouting chamber can be made using a small, plastic tofu-type container. Place soil mix inside and after planting and misting cover with a ziploc veggie bag. These are fairly new items which have micro-pores for breathability. Your seedlings will thrive from the combination of high humidity and air exchange with this simple setup. Seedlings should be allowed to nearly dry out before being gently sprayed with more water.

A few weeks after sprouting, consider giving them a feeding. My preferred fertilizer for peyote seedlings is a regular spraying of dilute (50% of recommended strength) liquid seaweed, available from a number of sources. If using another type, try to keep the nitrogen (N) level low and the phosphorous (P) level high. A 5-10-5 type formula is a good example. Remember to dilute the solution considerably (25% of normal strength) as these little guys don't need a whole lot of anything but time.

Too much sunlight, fertilizer, water, or cold are the main things to avoid in your seedling project, aside from impatience of course. By the end of the first year, seedlings should be large enough to transfer individually to a more permanent location. This can be in separate containers or in a nicely spaced, group garden.

Plants with already established taproots can produce several new usable buttons within a year or two. Thus each established plant becomes a source of more offshoots. Buttons must be sliced at ground level, or above, in order for offshoots to be produced. Sliced tops may be left to callous for a week or two, then re-rooted by laying in a porous soil or vermiculite/perlite mix. Water regularly, but allow to dry out between soakings. New roots will form from the cut base until after a year or so. A large taproot forms, making it hard to tell that it was ever cut.

Grafting For Growth

Small offshoots or seedlings may be grafted onto faster growing cactus rootstock. This increases growth rates by several times.

Single column, healthy specimens of *Trichocereus pachanoi* or *Myrtillo geometrizans* are favored as graft stock because of their finger-friendly, small or virtually non-existent spines. Slice about 1 inch below the growing tip. Next, bevel down surrounding ribs at an angle. You end up with a pencil shape w/flat top. This prevents areoles from producing new shoots too near the new graft. Next, with finger on top holding, make another thin slice, an eighth of an inch or so, under the first cut.

Your finger holds the sliver on after the knife has passed through. This prevents the soon-to-be grafting tip from being exposed to air too soon. Now slice a small peyote, preferably a small offshoot. Make sure and make all your cuts straight. (A sharp knife helps.) Quickly lift the sliced top from your rootstock and with the other hand place the freshly sliced peyote firmly on the center of the exposed stock tissue. You get points here for quick, smooth movements, as the less time the cuts are exposed the better. Gently secure the new peyote top to the stock using rubber bands or a firm, but not too heavy

weight. Be careful to not move the new graft as you do this. In three days remove the bands or weight and your new graft should remain, now bonded to its host's vascular tissue. Using this method growth can be enhanced by a factor of 5 to 10 times, small buttons growing to mature size in one year.

Large grafts can be sliced above the graft/stock joint in order to re-root on their own. Providing sufficient peyote base is left on the top of the host cactus, new offshoots will quickly appear from the now topless peyote, providing many new grafting candidates.

Suggested Reading:

- "Peyote and Other Entheogenic Cacti", Gottlieb, A., Ronin Publishing, 1997
- "The Peyote Book: A Study of Native Medicine", Mount, G.(Ed.), Sweetlight books, 1993
- "Straight With the Medicine", d'Azevedo, W., Heyday Books, 1978
- "Peyote Hunt: The Sacred Journey of the Huichol Indians", Myerhoff, B., Cornell Univ. Press, 1974
- "People of the Peyote" Schaefer, S. and Furst, P., (Ed.), The Univ. of New Mexico Press, 1996
- "Peyote Religion: A History", Stewart, O.C., Univ. of Oklahoma Press, 1987
- "Peyote the Divine Cactus", Anderson, E.F., Univ. of Arizona Press, 1996
- "The Peyote Cult", La Barre, W., Yale Univ. Publications in Anthropology, 1989
- "Peyote, The Medicine Journal", newsletter of The Peyote Foundation, PO Box 778, Kearny, AZ 85237, USA
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- "Flowers of Wiricuta: A Gringo's Journey to Shamanic Power", Pinkson, T.S., Wakan Press, 1995
- "Psychedelics Encyclopedia", Stafford, P., Ronin Publishing, 1992