



Ethnobotanical Leaflets



Peyote and Native American Culture

By Jennifer Majchrzak

Peyote was originally described in 1560, however it was not until the middle of the nineteenth century that botanists were able to conduct field research and correctly classify the cactus (Anderson, 1980). Field studies have concluded that there are two distinct populations of peyote which represent two species. The first and most common, *Lophophora williamsii* extends from southern Texas reaching south to the Mexican state of San Luis Potosi. The second and least common of the two species is *Lophophora difusa*, which occurs in the dryer terrain of the Mexican state of Queretaro. This species differs from the more common species by, "being yellowish-green rather than blue green in color, by lacking any type of ribs or furrows, by having poorly developed podaria (elevated humps), and by being a softer, more succulent plant" (Anderson 1980). Native Americans use peyote in their religious practices because of its psychoactive properties, and is usually eaten as mescal buttons, the dried, brown pieces of the above part of the cactus (Lewis, 1977).

The peyote religion is ancient in its origin and spread from Mexico, North in the mid 1800's at a time when Native Americans were desperately in need of spiritual strength and enlightenment, Native Americans were confined to reservations which were overseen by military authority, while many of their ritualistic practices and traditions were deemed as illegal. Origin stories regarding the practice of peyote ritual vary, however all encompass a common theme, namely that the 'Supernatural' took pity on those persecuted and communicated spiritually to the Native Americans through the journey experienced while under the chemical effects of peyote (Steltenkamp, 1982). The peyote ceremony which was originally introduced to the American Plains Indians consisted of a formal, all night prayer meeting typically held in a teepee, hogan or peyote house especially selected for the purpose of peyote ritual. Also it should be noted that depending on the tribe or group leader, elements of Christianity figure prominently through the ceremony (www.peyote.net). The majority of the peyotism practiced in the United States can be identified with the Native American Church (NAC). There are many divisions of the NAC, and each chapter is composed of several auxiliary chapters or moons, Each chapter has officers who are trained to carry out the various tasks associated with the peyote ceremony. The most prominent position is that of Road Chief who is responsible for governing the main elements of the meeting as well as leading the participants down "The Peyote Road" or the way of learning to live life well (www.peyote.net), There are other offices held in the ceremony such as Cedar Man, Fire Man,

Drum Man, and Earth Mother, and while many chapters have their own variances of the ceremony, many share common ceremonial elements along with the adherence to the practice of avoiding alcohol, devotion to family, and general moral living (www.peyote.net).

The ritualistic practice of peyote and shamanism, are commonly linked, however in the case of the Mescalero Apache Tribe the use of peyote in shaman rites had anything but a transcendental effect which eventually led to the abolishment of peyote from shamanistic ceremony. A lack of harmony exists between shamanistic ceremony and the rules applied to peyote ritual. In a typical shaman based practice, a single shaman is the principle figure and the experiences of those in attendance are subordinate (Boyer, Boyer, & Basehart, 1973). The religious ecstasy, vision, and communication with the supernatural were experiences unique only to the experience of the shaman and established his power. However, the use of peyote by all in attendance made the psychological and physiological effects common, and hence the uniqueness of the shaman's experience dissipated and the ceremonies transformed into a shamanistic rivalry between all in attendance and flourished with undertones of witchcraft (Boyer, Boyer, & Basehart, 1973). The Mescalero Apache Tribe was one of the few tribes that did incorporate the use of Christian belief into their practice and also never became associated with Peyote Religion, but rather used peyote to, "...affirm the vitality of tradition religious practices at a time when the impact of reservation confinement contributed to an increased awareness of cultural and social deprivation" (Boyer, Boyer, & Basehart, rt, 1973). The very thing that the Mescalero Apaches were trying to escape through the practice of peyote, the power and supremacy of the white man, ironically led to the participants of the ceremony vying for power and control over one another which eventually led to the abolition of peyote among the Mescalero Apaches. It must also be noted that the this tribe did not associate itself with the established Native American Church and perhaps if it did, the structure prescribed by the NAC may have kept the Apache tribe focused on the inward journey involved with sacrament rather than with the intrinsic human quest for domination and power.

The Native American Church was introduced to the Navajos in the 1930s by the Plains Indian tribe. The peyote ritual differs from established Navajo religion with regards to the ceremony itself. Navajo ceremonial ritual consists of a shaman leading a service known as a chant which could last as long as nine consecutive nights involving prayers in the form of song, specific acts by the healer and patient, and the creation- of potent visual symbols such as sand paintings (Csordas & Kiyaani, 1997). The contrasting peyote ceremony consists of a prayer meeting in which peyote is ingested under the leadership of the leader or road man while utilizing singing, drumming, and prayers in the time from of dusk to dawn. The Participant's prayers are focused upon an alter on which rests the "chief peyote", and concentration on this chief peyote is used to promote dialogue with nature (Csordas & Kiyaani, 1997), Navajos who were followers of peyote religion faced opposition from their own government which ruled the religion as illegal in 1940 and it did not make any motion towards tolerance until 1966. The federal government in 1994 embraced the constitutional rights of the Native Americans and allowed them the practice of the peyote religion (Csordas & Kiyaani, 1997), Mike Kiyaani, author of "On the Peyote Road" discussed in his article the inherent need for the white man to concern himself with- a practice which does not belong to him and that the white man's intrusion into peyote religion may strip the ritual of its true meaning:

"Now I'm worried that the white man is going to go for it That's what they usually do. That's what we don't want to happen. I don't think it's of all white people. This natural herb peyote is used by Native Americans with more sincerity. Indian people are more serious in their mind, in their heart, in the way they worship. Just let the Indians have it, let the Indians use, it in the way they want it, just natural. Our Identity is there."

Another tribe which practiced organized peyotism is the Osage tribe who is known as the most ardent converts to a sect of the practice known Big Moon peyotism (Swan, 1998). The Osage tribe were a tribe who had been cooperative with their dealing with the federal government as well as shrewd bargainers. Osage wealth was a result of interest on funds in the United States treasury which totaled \$8,562,690 and which resulted in payments of over \$200 per year to all Osage tribe members beginning in 1878 (Stewart, 1987). This new found wealth- along with the discovery of precious minerals and the discovery of oil in 1890 did not promote the welfare of the tribe, but rather temporarily hindered the growth and promotion of the tribe. Their wealth attracted whisky peddlers who preyed on the tribe's fortune as well as their appetite for alcohol. Osage agent Cryus Beede stated that, "The demoralization to Indian tribes consequent upon the liquor traffic among them gives grave apprehension to the propriety to too friendly relations between Indians and whites" (Stewart, 1987). This again reemphasizes the need for the white man to have inherent control over the Native American population aiding in the moral decay of a people who are naturally ethical. Peyote religion is what saved the Osage tribe from moral corruption, "Peyote induced a beautiful state and behavior of adherents was as different from that of whisky drinkers on a spree as that of peaceful sheep and rampant lions" (Stewart, 1987). According to Daniel C. Swan, the conversion to peyotism, by the Osage allowed "...secular leaders to restructure their society in response to a changing set of material relations of production and distribution." The irony of this situation is that the culture of the white man began to corrupt the Osage tribe, however with the practice of peyote religion the tribe was able to reorganize and focus inwardly with regards to their own ethical mantra. The very thing that saved the tribe is the very thing that the white man wants to abolish, again reemphasizing the notion that a non-native man has no place regarding the dealing of those who are truly native to the land they inhabit.

This is only a minuscule account of the effect the Peyote cactus, had upon Native American culture. They are three varying sets of circumstances which demonstrate the wide scope the plant had upon moral custom, socio-economic welfare, mental health and inner peace. To some tribes the use of peyote was found to stimulate awareness, heighten mental capacity, and fulfill religious obligations. While to others it served as a retardant to achieving heightened awareness, mental capacity and the fulfillment of religious obligations. The peyote road belongs to the Native Americans, whether they chose to follow-it or not. The white man has no place on its path, it was paved for Native Americans as an escape from the world the white man created. The impact this plant has had on civilization is that it is only way out for some, it is their vehicle of escape to drive them out of the material world and down the peyote road.

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Last updated: 12-Feb-2000 / du