

RISKS & REALITIES

As peyote use has evolved over the years, non-sacramental users have faced two potential dangers.

First, there's the risk of bad trips, which mostly center on a fear of dying or loss of control.

Tranquilizers can be administered in extreme cases, but the only way to *totally* eliminate the possibility of panic with a drug as powerful as peyote is to avoid using it altogether.

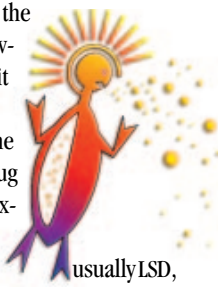
A second risk linked to mescaline derives from the reality of street-drug economics. That's because it's so expensive to synthesize the drug that other drugs are often substituted—usually LSD, PCP, or amphetamine-based psychedelics.

Real peyote is identifiable by its noxious taste, which can trigger a vomiting that's more relief than curse. And mescaline has a revolting taste of its own—and a sky-high price tag reflecting the scarcity of supply.

Still, the drawbacks—price, taste, laws—haven't stopped peyote and mescaline yet.

It was true to believers 400 years ago, and it seems no less true today: Conquistadors come and go, but peyote endures forever.

And so, some users might tell you, does the aftertaste.



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PEYOTE MESCALINE



History Lessons

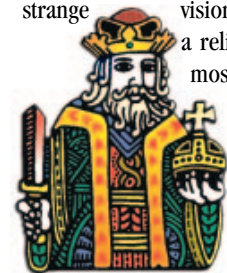
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CACTUS & CONQUISTADORS

When the Spanish Conquistadors hit the New World in the 16th century, they hoped to find gold and glory during their adventures in the Americas.

They found lots of the former and little of the latter along the way, and all kinds of stuff they hadn't counted on at all, including corn, tobacco, potatoes, chocolate, and a strange vision-inducing plant used by natives as



a religious sacrament and revered almost as a god.

That's when the problems started.

Because the Spaniards had their own ideas about God and sacraments and wanted to share them with their new subjects.

And they did—every chance they got.

And the plant, which the natives called “peyotl,” turned into a major point of contention.

And, to this day, it's pretty much stayed that way.

BACKGROUND NOTES

What all the excitement's been about is a small, spineless cactus (known botanically as *Lophophora williamsii*) which grows in the deserts of Mexico and the American Southwest. When the crown is sliced off and dried, it forms a hard, brownish disc known as a “button,” which is chewed for its hallucinogenic properties.



Cactus flower. Peyote, a.k.a. Lophophora williamsii.

Peyote buttons were chewed for religious purposes in Mexico centuries before the Conquistadors even knew Mexico existed. Early tales of peyote rituals among the Aztec and Toltec Indians date ceremonial use back some 3,000 years.

The cactus—and other “divine” plants, including psilocybin mushrooms, morning glory seeds, and datura—were employed for the purposes of healing, divining the future, and producing visions during sacred rites.

Peyote was believed to be a god-powerful medicine, capable of giving sight to the blind and healing incurable diseases. But to the Spaniards, it was the first American “drug problem.”

THE FIRST ‘WAR ON DRUGS’

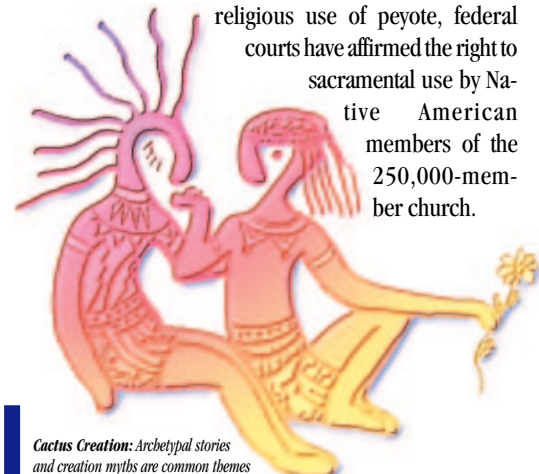
The Spaniards quickly outlawed “peyotism,” which they linked with cannibalism and witchcraft, and enacted the first set of anti-drug laws in the Western Hemisphere, all aimed at wiping out Indian use of the plant.

They succeeded—to a point. Over the next four centuries, they successfully drove the indigenous peyote-based religion far underground. But it refused to stay there.

During the American Civil War, peyote use began spreading north from Mexico on a large scale. Indian prophets, such as Quanah Parker and John Wilson, carried a Christianized version of the ancient ritual to more than fifty American tribes, including the Cheyenne, Shawnee, Blackfoot, and Sioux, and as far north as Canada. Their teachings blended traditional peyote chants and meditation with prayer and belief in Jesus.

In 1918 a group of peyotists formed the Native American Church to preserve peyote rituals and provide for continued sacramental use of the plant. Still, nonbelievers fought back.

And even though laws in 11 states eventually sought to ban religious use of peyote, federal courts have affirmed the right to sacramental use by Native American members of the 250,000-member church.



Cactus Creation: Archetypal stories and creation myths are common themes in peyote-inspired art, as in the pieces shown.

© Peyote Way Church of God, Klondike, AZ

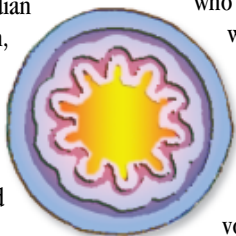


The ritual is believed to bestow the ability to glimpse beyond the form of everyday reality to the unity of energy and consciousness underlying all existence.

Still, challenges continue to be mounted, strengthened by a 1990 ruling by the U.S. Supreme Court, affirming the right of states to control ritual peyote use.

PEYOTE PRACTICES

The peyote ritual centers on a belief in a Great Spirit who created the universe and observes what happens, where, and to whom—everywhere and forever.



Peyote users believe the Spirit placed its own divine powers in the cactus and that, by eating its buttons, a believer can absorb that power and experience that spiritual force.

During a peyote ritual, which commonly involves sitting and staring into a large fire inside a tent for 12 hours or more, participants chew and swallow from 2-20 buttons, and sometimes as many as 30.

The plant produces a trance-like state, which is intensified by a pulsating drumbeat or by the chanting and prayers of participants absorbed in the peyote experience.

The ritual itself is believed to bestow special powers of healing and insight onto participants, including the ability to glimpse beneath the form and beyond the description of everyday, “consensual” reality to the unity of energy and consciousness underlying all existence.

To prepare themselves and purge themselves of everyday toxins, participants often undergo an extended period of fasting, meditation, and silence.

Still, swallowing the buttons isn’t easy or palatable, no matter how prepared a participant is.

In fact, peyote often triggers vomiting, which is considered to be a further act of purification, necessary for the Spirit’s entry into the body.



ACTIONS & EFFECTS

Peyote contains more than fifty psychoactive ingredients, the most powerful of which is **mescaline** (3,4,5-trimethoxyphenethylamine).

Named after the Mescalero Apaches, mescaline was first isolated from the peyote cactus in 1896 and independently synthesized in 1918.

As one of the first hallucinogens to be reproduced in the lab, mescaline became the center of scientific interest in the early 1900’s and was used in the experimental treatment of alcoholism, mental illness, and other disorders.

In doses of 200-500 mg (about 10-20 buttons), mescaline triggers increased heart rate, body temperature, and blood pressure and dilation of the pupils.

Normal coordination and reflexes are reduced, and the skin may feel dry and itchy. Peak effects hit 2-3 hours after ingestion, and run their course in about 12 hours.

Peyote and mescaline are best known for their unique hallucinogenic properties, which many users report as less disorienting—and hence more manageable—than LSD and other synthetic psychedelics.

Subjective effects can include rapid changes in mood, feelings of empathy and kinship with others, kaleidoscopic perceptual changes, and deeply moving, even profound, introspective spiritual experiences.

More difficult to describe is how, exactly, the drugs exert their unusual effects.

While mescaline is about 4,000 times less potent—microgram for microgram—than LSD, both drugs work in similar ways, by temporarily tilting the distribution and action in the brain of such neurotransmitters as dopamine and serotonin, although their exact mechanism of action remains unclear.