

Trichocereus pachanoi—A Mescaline Cactus Used in Folk Healing in Peru

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In north coastal Peru, a mescaline cactus called *San Pedro* (*Trichocereus pachanoi*²) is employed by folk healers in the diagnosis and cure of illness. Although such practices have been mentioned by Gutiérrez-Noriega (3), Gutiérrez-Noriega and Crúz Sánchez (4), Friedberg (1, 2), Lastres (5), and Schultes (6), no discussion has dealt adequately with the ethnobotanical aspects of such drug use in a healing context.

During the summer of 1967, under the aegis of the Institute of Social Psychiatry³ of San Marcos University, Lima, I was fortunate to be able to conduct an anthropological pilot study of a coastal Mestizo village some 500 miles north of Lima, where folk healing using this psychodysleptic substance is a specialized sphere of activity. In this small agricultural community, which will be called Valleseco (a pseudonym), located in the Department of Lambayeque, it is reputed that over 100 men and 3 women are actively engaged in the diagnosing and curing of illness in a practice inextricably linked to the use of *Trichocereus pachanoi*.

Although my study was designed to relate folk healing to the social structure of the community, some of the data that I obtained may be of interest to ethnobotanists. At the time of this writing, further interdisciplinary studies are being conducted to deal with subjective aspects of the use of this cactus. I will limit my remarks to the more general area of belief systems concerning

illness and the *materia medica* and *magica* of the healers.

Folk Beliefs Concerning Illness

Although the Peruvian coastal peasant recognizes empirical etiology of disease, ultimate cause of illness is a supernatural one. Empirical cures, although valued, are secondary or supplementary to the utilization of magical and supplicatory techniques (7). A major etiological category of illness is *mal aires*, which encompasses disease-producing vapors or airs believed to emanate from tombs or ruins of sacred places. In Valleseco, pains in various parts of the body, paralysis of extremities, pneumonia and gastro-intestinal disturbances are often attributed to *mal aires* (7,8).

Lacking medical facilities and a well balanced diet, possessing poor hygienic facilities, many villagers faced with the anxiety arising from illness, consult the *mesa* (literally translated "table") of a folk healer. In an all-night ritualistic curing ceremony, the healer and patient drink a potion made from *San Pedro*. While under the intoxication of the drug for some eight hours, the healer divines the cause of the illness afflicting the patient and prescribes herbs to administer to the sick person. Patients come not only from the village, but from many distant parts of Peru to healers recommended to them by friends and relatives.

Although all healers employ *Trichocereus pachanoi* in their curing ceremonies, variations in additives to the potion as well as ritualistic differences exist. Some healers add *Condorillo* (*Lycopodium* sp.),⁴ *Misha* (*Datura arborea*⁵) or *Hornamo* (unidentified) which increase both the purgative and psychodysleptic effect. I was told by one healer

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² In 1959, the French ethnobotanist Claudine Friedberg reported that the cactus *San Pedro* contains 1.2 g. of mescaline per/kg. of fresh material.

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⁴ Identified by the Javier Prado Museum of Natural History, Lima.

⁵ Identified by Friedberg (1960:25).



Fig. 1. *San Pedro* for sale in Chiclayo market (upper row). Photograph by Emilio Ríos.

that too large a dose of *Misha* could result in death to the patient, especially if he were already weakened by illness. The *San Pedro* and its additives cause nausea and heavy vomiting, which are believed important in purging the sick person of impurities. Healers are empirically quite knowledgeable in determining the quantity of the potion to be administered to a given patient. Often a judgment is based on body size, nature of the illness troubling the patient, length of time afflicted, etc. Generally, the cactus is cut up into pieces and boiled several hours in a large tin of water until only the essence remains.

Power to cure is believed to reside in the substance used by the healer, although it is generally acknowledged that some healers are more empirically wise than others.

The *materia medica* and *magica* of the healers varies, although distinct categories of objects can be delineated in most healing sessions. Since tables are laid to bewitch as well as to cure, the *mesa* of a folk healer contains not only the famed potion to be

drunk and medicinal herbs, but charms and defenses against counter-magic as well (Fig. 2). The largest single category present are highly polished and oddly shaped stones, each one of which has its own name. The curers believe that these stones adopt the form of persons and animals which attack enemies. Each stone is believed able to receive orders from the curer. Several of the stones are called "herb stone," because the curer, while under the influence of the drug, receives a vision to help him select the right herb to prescribe.

Another major category are defenses—consisting of a series of highly polished wooden sticks placed at the head of the table, in a protective file. At least one of these is an elegantly carved sword. The defenses are believed to keep evil spirits from approaching. Placed below the sword and sticks are various religious statues and holy pictures, such as the Virgin of Mercy, the Cross of Chalfon, religious pictures and crucifixes.

In addition, pottery vessels of some anti-



Fig. 2. Open-air *Mesa* of folk healer in Valleseco with ritual paraphernalia. Photograph by Marlene Dobkin.

quity called *huacos*, of Mochica and Chimú eras are present. They are used for love magic, i.e., to cause a man to become enamoured of a woman. Oddly shaped mineral chunks of gold and silver, believed to bring luck or facilitate locating *huacos*, also adorn the table. Assorted items, including phallic symbols used as fertility charms and a large variety of shells used to imbibe the brew of *San Pedro* and liquid tobacco snuff are present. Finally, herbs bottled in liquid substance (*pajas*) are placed on the table, to be prescribed by the healer at the end of the session.

The Ritual

The following is a description of one curing ceremony that I observed in Valleseco:

Under a thatched, open-air shelter located some distance from his farm house, the curer assembled three patients who had come to him by bus from a town some four hours to the north. The ceremony took place at night and was conducted without any artificial

light. The *materia medica* and *magica* described above was laid out on a cloth, with the patients seated along one side of it. Don M. had an apprentice who had been with him two years to assist him in the ceremony. A mixture of tobacco and water was inhaled from a shell as a nasal snuff by the assistant. At the same time, air was gulped to help bring the liquid snuff more quickly into the lungs. The *maestro* began to sing rather melodic, lulling songs, which began with the Lord's Prayer in Spanish. It was followed by fairly spontaneous verses, with Latin occasionally mixed in with Quechua.⁶ The singing was accompanied by the rhythmic manipulation of gourds functioning as rattles, which at times were beat without singing. After about an hour of the singing, the essence of *San Pedro* was drunk by the healer his assistant and all the patients. The cup containing the potion was tapped lightly against the stones, swords and polished sticks of the *mesa* to enhance its effects.

⁶ Quechua is not spoken by these people.

Occasionally, a patient, the curer or his assistant left the shelter to vomit up some of the potion which was strongly emetic. More singing followed, with prayers addressed to the Virgin Mary, and to God. Occasionally, the song recited the help that the curer would give to the sick person. Each patient in his turn stood up, while the assistant removed one of the ornate swords from the table, placed it firmly in the ground between the feet of the sick man or woman and put the patient's hands upon the handle. The apprentice then took tobacco in his nose, as snuff, bending down to the ground at the feet region, the mid-section and finally the head of the patient. This was repeated with sword held firmly behind the patient. Then the sword was rubbed over every part of the patient's body, with care taken to follow the form of a cross (during this part of the ceremony, the patient stood with his arms outstretched). All of the patients were treated in this manner. The healer then spent several minutes, either privately or in front of the rest of the group, discussing the symptoms and problems of the patient. When this was completed, the songs were resumed. At one point, the assistant rose, sprinkled water in the air and cut the air with his sword to drive out "evil spirits." At another point in the ceremony, the healer rubbed together some of the many polished stones which were laid out on the cloth, causing electric sparks to fly in the darkness of the night. Finally, at dawn, the last series of songs were sung and the ceremony was over.

Healers maintain that, under the continuing effects of the cactus, they receive insight into the nature of the illness affecting their patients. The visions received, stimulated by the striking of herbal stones, are a source of pride to the healers and are cited also as the source for decisions as to which herbs to prescribe. Many healers utilize some object or a small guinea pig (*cuye*) in addition to the potion, which is passed over the body of the sick person symbolically to extract the illness. The rodent is subsequently killed, and its internal organs are examined to discover where the illness has afflicted the patient.

Much of the ritual used by the healer is syncretized with Roman Catholic beliefs,

and, in fact, much of healing ritual is lifted intact from Catholic liturgy. Latin prayers, somewhat garbled but still familiar to the villagers and other patients in a land predominantly Catholic, are also recited. Prayers are addressed to various Catholic saints, who are supplicated to intercede on behalf of a sick person.

In a subsequent article, data relating to the function of folk healing *vis-à-vis* the community as a whole will be discussed. This short report will serve here to describe the particular specialty of this agricultural village, where healers farm their lands by day and engage in lucrative, ritualistic healing by night.

Peruvian folk healing utilizing *Trichocereus pachanoi* offers us an excellent 'natural laboratory' for an assessment of the potential curative value of psychodysleptic substances viewed in a social context.

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