

Faith, Belief, and the Peyote Crisis

by K. Trout and Mark Hoffman

"The long term prognosis, if present conditions continue to exist, is grim." -E.F. Anderson, 1995

Over the past two decades, concern has grown regarding the increasing scarcity, and decreasing size, of wild populations of peyote cacti in Texas. Since the 1980s there have been alarming reports that peyote populations had been "greatly diminished" from what they had been only a few years before. (Anderson 1995) Since that time, the need for conservation measures has grown even more severe as the private lands, which constitute about 90 percent of peyote's habitat, are developed. These are often being root-plowed in order to create grazing pasture for cattle, or have become private hunting parks closed to hunters.

With more than 250,000 peyotists depending on the dwindling supply of wild cacti, the future of this unique and vibrant Native American religion is threatened. Because all the peyote consumed by its members is collected from a narrow band along the Rio Grande, conscientious plantings and controlled harvesting could, and would, be a great boon to the NAC. Instead, we may soon be witnessing a period when the peyote plant will cease to serve as an ally to the NAC.

The present crisis has been brought on by the convergence of several important factors including: a large and growing number of NAC members taking the sacrament, the large scale loss of habitat due to development and root plowing, and the use of unsound harvesting techniques (such as root-harvesting, harvesting small, non-adult plants, and the failure to return seeds to the wild). Another culprit is the current legal situation, which, while allowing widespread and aggressive harvesting, makes cultivation, propagation and even seed planting illegal. The 1997 law making peyote seeds a Schedule One controlled substance, without including an exception for either the NAC or peyoteros (those who harvest and sell peyote to NAC members), makes cultivation a tricky issue. The Texas Department of Public Safety (DPS) has stated that they consider the peyoteros to have legal protection only to harvest wild populations and none to cultivate or even replant seeds. In other words, the church member's only de facto right is to eat the peyote until the wild populations are depleted.

As it is, much of the wild peyote is inaccessible to peyoteros and NAC members because it is on private land. But while peyote will still exist, it may not continue to be found on accessible lands, in adequate number, for the faithful within the NACs to continue having access. While peyote can and will repopulate itself, without immediate action this is unlikely to occur within our lifetimes. This is less a question of extinction than one that seriously affects the future of the churches, unless they do not object to being converted to a pale reminder of what they once were.

The idea that a huge-and growing-organization can depend on a small and dwindling habitat without any cultivation efforts (not even returning its seeds to the wild!) is an approach common among shortsighted non-Indians, and those who would exploit nature for their own gain. What is most troubling, however, is that a general lack of ecological awareness, unsound harvesting practices (Morgan 1983a) and a failure to return seeds is common among those who consume the vast majority of peyote-the NAC members themselves, and those who are authorized by law to supply plant material to the churches.

Would you believe it if someone told you that, if your faith was strong enough, there would be no need to plant crops or work in your garden, and that all your needs would be constantly fulfilled by the Great Spirit? When it comes to peyote, this is exactly what we are expected to believe.

Certain voices, some in leadership positions, have claimed that Peyote is so powerful that it will miraculously reproduce, even if it is not allowed to live long enough to form and drop seeds, and those who would like to plant seeds are discouraged-even reproached-for having too little faith. Following this doctrine of 'immaculate germination,' one such

'believer' has stated in court that he believed peyote can rise up out of the ground and walk away if it does not want him to eat it, yet insists it needs stronger protection from non-Indians.

Taking as policy, (as, it seems, do some NACs,) the idea that the magical power of peyote will protect it from every onslaught is tragically shortsighted. Such dangerous and ecologically unsound reasoning, and the pervasive lack of awareness and concern for the increasing scarcity of peyote *must* be addressed. The impact of this impending crisis has been gradually increasing, as more members are resorting to eating dime-sized peyote buttons. Already, Mexican plants are being purchased by NACs in order to help offset the lack of potency of the tiny peyotes being harvested in Texas. Use of these similarly limited populations can only delay dealing with the real problems and do not provide any lasting solution.

If the NACs continue to neglect taking even the simplest steps towards responsible stewardship of their sacrament in the U.S., what will be the consequences of this recent development on the other side of the border, where some native peyotists have already begun to witness increased scarcity of the cactus? Such a stop-gap measure only underscores the desperate need for immediate action in order to ensure the long term availability of peyote to the large number of church members.

On Faith and Belief

"The use of the Herb or Root called Peyote... is a superstitious [sic] action and reprov'd as opposed to the purity and sincerity of our Holy Catholic Faith, being so that this said herb, nor any other cannot possess the virtue and natural efficacy attributed to it for said effects, nor to cause the images, phantasms and representations on which are founded said divinatings [sic], and that in these one sees notoriously the suggestion and assistance of the devil, author of this abuse..." (Inquisitors statement, June, 1620, Mexico City, [in Ott, 1993])

Those who first ate peyote, and founded the peyote religions, did so not because they came with faith to this cactus, but rather, they came without either faith or knowledge of what peyote could do. In eating it, the power of the peyote offered them faith and wisdom by revealing its miraculous spiritual and healing powers. It is well known that peyote, like all entheogens, can impart its truths even to those who approach with no belief or expectation. (Witness the report of Charles Shell [below].)

While faith may be important, it is no substitute for first-hand experience, especially when such experience involves direct Communion with the vibrancy, power and wisdom of the spiritual Other. Faith was not what first lead people to begin ritually consuming peyote, nor was it faith that enabled its miraculous ability to communicate precious truths to humanity. Faith is what has, for millennia, been *found* in peyote. The alkaloids produced by the plant are singularly important because of their entheogenic properties. If this were not the case, any plant could serve as the sacrament. *Psychoactivity-and psychoactivity alone-distinguishes a true Sacrament from a placebo.*

The primacy of entheogenic religion has one major advantage that accounts for its often virulent resistance to conversion; placebo religions simply cannot compete with a genuine Sacrament. Unlike a placebo, one's relationship with these plant teachers is immediate and self-evident. Entheogenic spirituality is, before all else, a communal and didactic experience; it is not, (as are organized placebo religions in general,) dependant on a religious imagination built upon vague, acculturated conceptions of 'faith.' This false faith, in turn, is derived not from knowledge or experience, but from the acceptance of external authority, dogma and the fleeting secular and social norms. The ability of peyote and similar sacraments to reach out and teach should never be underestimated; these plants, these beings, are capable of great personal and spiritual transformations. Even harshest critics of the peyote religion have been shown the truth by ingesting the cactus. Superintendent Charles E. Shell was not simply a devout anti-peyote worker, but the very man who first educated and started W.E. "Pussyfoot" Johnson on his unholy reign of terror against the Sacrament.

When Shell deliberately ate peyote (in order to 'scientifically' report on its effects), he described experiencing thoughts, "along the lines of honor, integrity, and brotherly love." He claimed that he, "seemed incapable of having base thought" and reported, "I do not believe that any person under the influence of this drug could possibly be induced to commit a crime." He certainly had no faith in this plant, and most certainly did not convert, yet, by simply ingesting it in a psychoactive amount, the peyote was able to speak for itself.

Since one-on-one conversion is (and was) a frustrating undertaking for evangelical placeboists, they sometimes resorted with the old Inquisitorial standby-death by burning. Thus, fired with the bliss of ignorance and false faith, Christians often treated the sacred cactus as they had so many other demons in society, be they found in witches or in books. One need not look far to find such intolerant and autocratic religious sentiment on the fringes of the peyote religion.

Since the arrival of the Catholic Spanish, many Christians believe that only through the destruction of these cacti can peyote eaters be brought to Christ and find salvation. In fact, small mountains of peyote have been destroyed to help achieve this end. Simply put, the presence of an Active Sacrament in the hands of the peyote eaters threatens the faith of those who possess only a placebo sacrament (that is, one active *only-and entirely-through* faith)

When peyote is no longer available, the placeboists might say, *"But look, your experience today is the same as when you were eating those peyotes last month. This is because Christ, and only Christ, was always responsible, never that Peyote. You never needed Peyote; be glad that it is gone forever and that you now can see the truth we have to offer."*

In fact, such voices are already being heard. A couple of years ago, at a local NAC meeting, an argument arose where it was declared that not only was cultivation wrong, but that *alkaloid content had no impact on the experience*. It was insisted that the tiny buttons being eaten at that meeting were capable of full effects, (the size of the fresh buttons used in that meeting ranged from the size of a dime to a quarter, indicating they were all harvested long before they reached flowering age) and if full effects did not result then it was a sure sign of the lack of faith of the participant. It might be argued that even the smallest buttons contain the spirit of peyote, but these do not have nearly the same power of older and larger plants.

At this point the peyote faith still possesses knowledge of a sacrament that, given an adequate dose, is alive and active in all its original power. It is capable of granting individuals direct contact with the Power that created them, negating any need for any intermediaries or interpreters of the 'will of God.' If anything will save this unique Native American religion, it will be grace and wisdom conferred by its sacrament on attentive and truly dedicated followers of The Road.

However, if the 'faithful' continue to ignore their responsibility for the future of peyote in the wild, and do not work hard, and *fight for the right to work hard*, to preserve it, then it will become so scarce as to no longer support the spiritual needs of the churches. The only viable alternative depends upon the NAC becoming aware of the immediate need for cultivation, propagation and conservation.

Those eating or drinking sacraments such as the San Pedro cactus or ayahuasca in South America, or those eating Iboga in Africa, are also still in possession of an active Sacrament. The NAC, the UDV (União do Vegetal [Brazil]), the San Pedro cult (Peru) and members of the Bwiti (Gabon), all have incorporated what they found true in Christianity without rejecting the original religion as taught by their sacraments.

Our brothers and sisters in Peru use another cactus as a sacrament; one that is very similar to peyote and could help fill the needs of the NACs while peyote is allowed to recover in the wild. The San Pedro cactus grows quickly and is a readily renewable resource. While admittedly a different sacrament, it shares much of peyote's spirit, healing power as well as a close chemical relationship (mescaline being the chief entheogenic compound present in both). Like peyote, the San Pedro cactus is also a 'face of God' and, like peyote, it is known to have used by humans for at least several thousand years. Unlike peyote, however, San Pedro is fast growing, readily available, and easily cultivated; unlike peyote it has long been a cultigen, and it is legal to grow and possess in the United States.

The NACs would do well to carefully consider the fact that the UDV, the Bwiti (and others using Iboga sacramentally), and many among the myriad of San Pedro followers all cultivate their Sacrament, or obtain it from those that do. All of these groups are strong in faith, have a secure future, and all believe in self-reliance, thus taking responsibility for their own existence through the act of cultivation.

Debates about the spiritual value of cultivated plants versus wild plants, or the importance of a psychoactive sacrament versus faith alone, will no doubt rage on *ad infinitum*. There is nothing wrong with such debate so long as those who truly care about the Active Sacrament don't lose sight that they must take responsibility for the future of their spiritual tradition. Those who feel that seed planting or cultivation is contrary to faith, or threatens their precarious legal right to practice their entheogenic religion, should not interfere with those who recognize the need to take immediate action. One way or another, self-reliance has to become a guiding principle if the NACs want to ensure their future. In contrast, to see their future seriously jeopardized all the churches have to do is *nothing at all*.

Notes on Peyote Propagation

by K. Trout

Contrary to what is widely believed, peyote is one of the easiest cactus species to successfully cultivate from seed. It is far more water tolerant and rugged than most ornamental cactus species common in horticulture. Culprits underlying failures include providing inadequate calcium minerals in the soil mix or not providing regular ventilation. (Peyote seedlings are intolerant of stale air.)

Adding gypsum, dolomite and/or limestone to the soil to create a slightly alkaline mix is required for good health and eventual flowering. Following any of the general advice published for growing cacti from seed works fine.

Fungus, gnats, or other root maggots can be a problem in some commercial soil mixes, but specialty cactus soils are available which do not use the pest-harboring peat.

To start the seeds, simply cover them with either grit, coarse sand, or soil once or twice, as deep as the seeds are thick. Bottom water the soil at the first watering or mist heavily until thoroughly dampened and then cover with saran wrap to retain humidity. Then place your seeds somewhere warm, and remove the plastic wrap once small green blobs are noticed.

The flats should be kept under fluorescent plant lights no more than 8-10 inches away, but if a reddish bronzing or a pale appearance is noticed, raise or lower the lights a couple of inches (respectively). The use of humidity domes and heating mats will greatly enhance both germination and growth rates. Daily misting will be required for at least the first year of life.

Seedlings should be hardened off by gradually introducing them to more light and outdoor conditions over the course of a year (or more) prior to transferring to the wild. Careful placement of small limestone rocks can provide the plants with both shade and physical protection. When young but wild crafted plants should be allowed to reach at least an inch or more in diameter prior to repopulation efforts. Peyote thrives under plants which allow filtered sun to reach them. Most do not fare very well in full sun.

With a bit of patience and some care, there is no reason mass repopulation efforts cannot succeed. This is assuming they begin, of course. It has been claimed by many people that peyote cannot be successfully cultivated anywhere. Numerous Czechoslovakians, Derek Westlund and the Arizona-based Peyote Foundation have all thoroughly disproved this claim. However, there is one way in which this statement is true, in the United States at least.

Despite the Peyote Foundation's example of just how successful diligent cultivation efforts can be, and despite their purported protection to do so under Arizona state law, over 11,000 plants were seized by law enforcement. Thus, such casualties of the 'war on drugs' represents the only reason that peyote might not be successfully mass cultivated in the United States. Peyote is illegal to cultivate, and will be destroyed if found.

For more information on proper harvesting and propagation techniques visit:

http://www.erowid.org/plants/peyote/peyote_faq.shtml

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