

The God in the Flowerpot ❖

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HERE IS A CACTUS PLANT in a flowerpot; it is small, spineless, grayish, apparently inedible and hardly a thing of beauty by any aesthetic standard. The botanist would recognize it as *Lophophora williamsii*. The scientist engaged in pharmaceutical research might identify it as a source of the drug called mescaline. Wyoming Indians refer to it among themselves as "the medicine," using that word in its double meaning as a cure for illness and a source of supernatural power. The Tarahumara Indians of Mexico call it *hikuli*, and the Aztecs called it *peyotl*. To the white men who are familiar with it, the peyote cactus is a plant containing an interesting assortment of alkaloids in varying proportions. To the Indians who use it in religious ceremonies it is often more than a "medicine," it is a god. The plant, which has a limited range in extremely arid, almost uninhabited country along the Mexican border, is the object of annual pilgrimages by the Tarahumara, who must make a journey of several days on foot to collect it. Oklahoma and Wyoming Indians import the dried "button" or raise peyote in pots. Whenever possible it is eaten fresh, without preparation; the dried button may be powdered, pounded into paste or made into tea. The god, being rendered fit for eating, presides over the meeting where peyote is taken and "sends" the songs sung and the visions seen by the members who partake of this sacrament. The peyote cult is not based on a written or spoken Word, but on the experience of the members during the communion.

My hypothetical flowerpot might have contained any one of a dozen plants, for instance, the Texas mountain laurel whose seeds are known as "mescal beans," several varieties of *Datura* including the jimsonweed of the American Southwest, certain lianas of the South American forests, a kava (awa) plant from Polynesia, the soma of ancient India, the haoma of the Parsis, the coca of Peru, or Indian hemp — the source of marijuana and hashish. The opium

* Reprinted with permission from *The American Scholar*, Vol. 32, No. 4, Autumn, 1963, pp. 578-86. This article is part of a forthcoming book by Miss Barnard.

poppy would probably not be out of place. Several species of hallucinogenic mushrooms belong in the list, or would belong if they could be induced to grow in pots. I have used the American peyote because it is perhaps the most thoroughly documented of all these plants, none of which is valued for its vitamins or caloric content. All are drug plants: they inebriate, soothe pain or function as mind-changers. Some of them are open doors to the otherworld, and as such they have religious uses. They are sacred plants, magic herbs or shrubs, magic carpets on which the spirit of the shaman can travel through time and space. Like shamanism, which has been described as a religious technique rather than a religion in itself, the magic plants are vehicles for a special kind of experience adaptable to the use of most religions that acknowledge an otherworld and permit its exploration.

IF THERE WERE SUCH A FIELD AS THEO-BOTANY, the study of these plants and their cults would be work for a theo-botanist. As it is, little has been published in the way of comparative studies, perhaps for the very good reason that the scholar who attempts such a study must step out of his own field into four or five others, and thereby risk his reputation. Laymen, therefore, who have no prestige to lose, burst in where scholars fear to tread, and here am I. My own interest is in the mythology of the drug plants, and my approach has been by way of mythology, a study as perilous to the scholar as theo-botany. The hazards have therefore seemed less and the facts, such as we have, reassuringly firm. My approach to the subject was inadvertent, almost accidental; my experience that of one who has been treading water interminably and feels solid ground beneath his feet at last. Half a dozen important mythological themes — the shaman's journey, the food of immortal life, the food of occult knowledge, the fate of the disembodied soul, the communication with the dead, plant-deities — all converge on this point: that is, on some actual food (usually a drug plant) ritually consumed, *not* symbolically but for the experience it confers. Most of these drug plants are what Aldous Huxley calls "mind-changers." The experience differs according to the drug or mixture of drugs and alcohol taken by the shaman, the initiate or the communicant whoever he may be. He may fall into a coma lasting for a day or more; he may be awake, but anesthetized; his mind and body may be stimulated to wakefulness and fatigue dispelled so that he can perform feats of endurance quite impossible without the assistance of the drug. He may experi-

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ence color visions of varying intensity. Euphoria, quickened or dulled sensation, a displaced center of consciousness seemingly *outside* the body, a sense of enormously protracted time and extended space, and a feeling of weightlessness, of escape from the forces of gravity, are among the possible effects. Usually the communicant fasts for a day or longer before taking the peyote, soma, mushroom or extract of jimsonweed. One good reason for the fast is of course the quicker and more powerful action of the drug on an empty stomach.

Bearing these facts in mind, let us return to the peyote and its mythology. So far as I know there is only one peyote myth, although there are many variations on the single theme. Since the peyote tradition has moved outward from the very limited peyote-growing region, the myth has presumably been passed along with the dried plants and the ritual. The peyote myth tells how an Indian (or several Indians — number, age, sex and condition varying according to the particular version) is lost or wounded and left for dead in an uninhabited desert region. Starving, thirsty, at the end of his strength, he stumbles upon the peyote. A voice tells him to eat it. He eats it and feels his strength miraculously restored. His hunger and thirst are alleviated, and he is able to make his way back to his people, to whom he bears the word of a new god sent to heal their suffering. Usually the Indian hears a voice directing him to eat the plant, or sees a godlike form in the shape of an Indian brave standing where the plant stood; in some versions he is given instructions by Peyote himself on the proper performance of the peyote ritual. Peyote has been used to prolong the endurance of dancers, to alleviate pain, to produce visions, to give courage in warfare and generally as a means of healing and communion in the peyote cults.

There are several points of almost equal importance in this brief summary. One is that the first man to eat peyote was very likely on the verge of starvation in that arid region where the plant grows. It is so unpalatable in appearance, so difficult to chew and swallow, that only a ravenously hungry man would be likely to make the effort. The lack of food plants in the peyote-growing area makes this hypothesis still more plausible. Furthermore, if a hungry man were to eat the fresh peyote he would almost certainly have a startling experience similar to the one described in the myth. His strength would be restored in an apparently miraculous manner and

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he would probably have hallucinations of some sort — visual or auditory or both. The peyote ritual, which presumably took shape gradually, was later attributed to the personified peyote, a god who was said to have revealed himself in a vision.

IF THE READER SUPPOSES that I am using the myth to shed light on the origins of the peyote cult, he is mistaken; I am using the *Lophophora williamsii* and all we know about it to shed light on the myth. It should be obvious at once that if we lift the myth from its cultural context, and substitute the word "cactus" or even "plant of life" for the word "peyote," the tale might quickly find its way into collections of myths and folklore concerned with *imaginary* fruits, leaves, roots or stalks that are sought over the earth, guarded by dragons, used to inspire poets, to lend strength to the arm of the warrior or renew the youth of the immortal gods. Should we conclude, then, that the myth of peyote's discovery is one variant on an almost universal theme attributable to the almost universal sameness of the unconscious mind? Or is it possible that the plants in the other myths are not necessarily imaginary? Are they, perhaps, real plants in imaginary gardens? Perhaps their mythical uses are derived from their cult use, and extended by hyperbole until the plant itself becomes mythical in the songs and retold tales.

The soma-drink of the Hindus was made from a real plant upon which the soma cult rested just as the Plains Indian or Tarahumara peyote cult rests upon the peyote plant. The soma plant, pounded, soaked, and wrung out of a strainer, provided a drink that was inebriating even without fermentation. The soma was deified as the god Soma, who inspired seers and poets and fortified the warrior. The kava-drink of Polynesia was prepared in much the same way from the kava plant (*Piper mythisticum*, "intoxicating pepper") and was used as a ritual drink, as a libation poured to the gods, and as a trance-inducing beverage for the soothsayers. Both these plants have heavenly counterparts that provide a tippie for the gods. In other words, they have a mythology, and a much more extensive mythology than that of the peyote plant. The jimsonweed, prepared by maceration and mixed with water in a ceremonial bowl, was formerly used by some California Indians during initiations, when the novice was expected to see visions and gain shamanistic power. It, too, has its mythology. The sacred mushrooms of Oaxaca are taken raw, on an empty stomach, like the fresh peyote. When the shaman

has swallowed the mushroom, the mushroom-deity takes possession of the shaman's body and speaks with the shaman's lips. The shaman does not say whether the sick child will live or die; the *mushroom* says. Some Indians say of sacred plants used by their shaman, that the soul of an ancestor has entered the plant; it is he who takes possession of the shaman and speaks through his mouth. The oracle at Delphi chewed laurel leaves for the same effect; in a state of inebriation induced by a small amount of cyanide in the laurel, she surrendered to the god (in this case Apollo), who used her as his instrument. His will was made known through her utterances delivered in trance and interpreted by the attendant priests. The laurel was, of course, sacred to Apollo.

Apollo, like the Norse god Woden and most shamans of whatever race or sect, was associated with healing as well as divination or prophecy. The same plant that brings visions or otherworld experiences may alleviate pain. Even if it does not, the herbalist who knows the medicinal uses of healing herbs has the best opportunity to possess the occult knowledge conferred by hallucinogenic shrubs and fungi. There are plants used to ease the pain of childbirth and myths of magic plants used for the same purpose. There is a Peruvian tale, very like the peyote myth cited above, telling how men first discovered the use of the cinchona bark from which quinine is made. If we begin our inquiry into the possible reality of the "magic" plants figuring in mythology with a compendium of real plants and their real uses in medicine, divination and religion, the list is immensely long and inevitably immensely tangled because medicine, divination and religion are tangled. Medicine enters this complex not because primitive medicine was limited to faith healing, but because the shrubs and herbs used in treatment were also used in religious ceremonies.

The most obvious thread for the ambitious theo-botanist to grasp would be the relation of drug plants and intoxicants to shamanism and its characteristic mythology of the disembodied soul. The greatest obstacle the student would encounter is a dearth of knowledge about the drugs used and their precise effects on the nervous system. We know enough about shaman mythology to make a beginning, and we have many eyewitness accounts of shaman performances; but all too often we are told simply that the shaman "takes something," without being told what he takes. This gap in

the narrative can be explained in part by the shaman's reluctance to give away his secrets, and in part by the fact that early informants were inclined to regard the shaman's act as Satanism if they were Christians or sheer hocus-pocus if they were skeptics. The current anthropological tendency, so far as I can make out, is to study the shaman as a psychological or cultural phenomenon. Mircea Eliade in his book *Le Chamanisme* mentions the use of drug plants by many shamans, but seems to consider the drugs incidental to the tradition. The pattern, he implies, is already formed; the drug, when discovered, is adapted to the shaman's use. This assumption parallels that of the mythologists who put the desire for an afterlife and the belief in an imaginary nectar of immortality before the experience of actual plants and beverages used in the ceremonial communion with the gods or the ancestors. The food of occult knowledge, by the same token, is treated as fiction; and when the shaman drinks a mysterious beverage, it is assumed that he does so in pretence that it is the mythical draught. But isn't this putting Medea's chariot before her team of serpents?

WHEN WE CONSIDER THE ORIGIN OF THE MYTHOLOGIES and cults related to drug plants, we should surely ask ourselves which, after all, was more likely to happen first: the spontaneously generated idea of an afterlife in which the disembodied soul, liberated from the restrictions of time and space, experiences eternal bliss, or the accidental discovery of hallucinogenic plants that give a sense of euphoria, dislocate the center of consciousness, and distort time and space, making them balloon outward in greatly expanded vistas? A belief in the soul's reincarnation would seem to me more plausible than the widespread idea of a soul's continued independent, disembodied existence after it leaves the body, a concept usually explained by night-dreaming or an irrational fear of the dead. Perhaps the old theories are right, but we have to remember that the drug plants were there, waiting to give men a new idea based on a new experience. The experience might have had, I should think, an almost explosive effect on the largely dormant minds of men, causing them to think of things they had never thought of before. This, if you like, is direct revelation.

Trance, self-induced by whatever means, is an inseparable part of shamanism. During the trance the shaman's body is said to be emptied of his soul. There are two traditional interpretations of this phenomenon: one is the replacement of the shaman's soul by

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another spirit, that of a god, ancestor or deceased shaman. (The deceased shaman may of course be both god and ancestor, and any of the three may take animal form.) In the other interpretation, the one I am concerned with here, the liberated soul of the shaman goes on a journey, perhaps in search of a lost soul, perhaps as escort for the soul of one who has just died, conducting it to the land of the dead. The dislocated or liberated soul may fly across the pampa on a spirit-horse or ascend into the sky, to the moon or the North Star. R. G. Wasson, describing the effect of the divine mushroom taken in a séance at Huautla, says: "There is no better way to describe the sensation than to say that it was as though my very soul had been scooped out of my body and translated to a point floating in space, leaving behind the husk of clay, my body." This is the shaman's journey.

The effect of peyote or hallucinogenic mushrooms taken ceremonially to the accompaniment of drums, songs or the hypnotic chant of the shaman demanding the descent of the spirit is naturally somewhat different from that produced in a laboratory or office while a doctor sits beside his subject with a notebook. Nevertheless, Aldous Huxley's testimony on the effect of mescaline, especially insofar as time is concerned, is eloquent: "I could, of course, have looked at my watch," he says, "but my watch, I knew, was in another universe. My actual experience had been, was still, of an indefinite duration or alternatively of a perpetual present made up of one continually changing apocalypse." The mushrooms of Huautla do not contain mescaline, but the effect, according to Mr. Wasson, is similar: "The mushrooms sharpen, if anything, the sense of memory, while they utterly destroy the sense of time. On the night that we have described we lived through eons. When it seemed to us that a sequence of visions had lasted for years, our watches would tell us that only seconds had passed." The Indians say of the mushrooms: "*Le llevan ahí donde Dios está*" — "They carry you there where God is."

When the soma is poured on straw, the souls of the ancestors gather in their thousands to drink it, because this is their food. When the kava is poured in libation or drunk by the priests, the souls of the dead are invoked, and the entry of the shaman into trance announces their arrival. Ceremonially speaking, these are foods of disembodied spirits, but the Chinese have, in the Taoist

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tradition, another variant of the food of immortality. Here the emphasis is not on shamanism or the consultation of oracles, but on mysticism combined with alchemy. The Taoists, in their search for an actual "food of immortality," experimented with drug plants and venoms. They knew the uses of laurel, Indian hemp and muscarine extracted from the glands of the poisonous toad. They knew the *ling-chih*, the "divine fungus" eaten by Taoist hermits and depicted by Taoist painters. In one of his poems, Li Po announces that he has swallowed the pellet of immortality "and before the lute's third playing" — that is, the third stanza of a song — "have achieved my element." Does anyone suppose that Li Po really believed that a pellet would make him immortal? Was his pellet simply imaginary? Or was he speaking of the euphoria conferred by one of the drug plants known to the Taoist priests? To me it seems clear that his pellet was as real as a pellet of peyote paste; it was to him a "food of life" in the same sense that our *aqua vitae* is a "water of life." I also suspect that at least half the other foods of life (apples, ambrosia, leaves, bark, roots and elixirs) had their beginnings in real plants. The "talking" grasses and trees that the shaman uses to bring on his trance are certainly real, and insofar as they are used by him for this purpose, they are foods of knowledge — that is, of occult knowledge. Looking at the matter coldly, un-intoxicated and unentranced, I am willing to prophesy that fifty theobotanists working for fifty years would make the current theories concerning the origins of much mythology and theology as out-of-date as pre-Copernican astronomy. I am the more willing to prophesy, since I am, alas, so unlikely to be proved wrong.

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