

Native American Church Peyotism and the Treatment of Alcoholism

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THE ALMOST THIRTY YEAR FREEZE on research into the beneficial uses of psychedelics is slowly starting to thaw. Human subject studies have been approved by the FDA for Phase I safety studies of ibogaine (a derivative of a West African plant *iboga*) which may turn out to be an important new treatment for heroine and cocaine addiction. Ketamine (a general anesthetic, which at sub-anesthetic doses facilitates altered states of consciousness), has been shown to facilitate abstinence from alcohol in chronic alcoholics (Krupitsky 1992, 1997). Research is now underway in Peru to study *ayahuasca*, a mixture of two Amazonian plants that may also be of use in the treatment of addictions.

From time immemorial, indigenous peoples have used mind-altering plants to facilitate spiritual growth and healing. Early petroglyphs in Northern Africa indicate mushroom rituals (circa 12,000 B.C.) and early Indian Vedic texts mention *soma*, a mind altering substance, also believed to be a mushroom.

In the Northern American Continent the use of mushrooms dates back before written history as well as the use of the peyote cactus (*Lophophora williamsii*). Indigenous peoples as far back as 6,000 years ago probably used peyote. That's when we find the first traces of man in the deserts of Mexico. Peyote's use can be traced from central Mexico to the Southern areas of Texas in the 1800s. By the end of the 1800s the ritual use of this cactus had spread to the central parts of the United States and started to be used widely as a pan-Native American religion. Today the Native American Church of North America is the largest pan-Native American religion in North America. Its ceremony is rooted in the native concept of holistic health and harmony with nature. The use of peyote in a structured religious setting, with the guidance of a socially sanctioned healer, has been reported by some authors to be a powerful treatment for alcoholism among Native Americans and a way of bringing balance back into the lives of its participants.

Unfortunately, to date there have not been any controlled studies of the use of peyote in

this setting to treat alcoholism or other addiction disorders. Most of the literature has consisted of anecdotal accounts of its effectiveness (Albaugh & Anderson, 1974; Bergman, 1971; Pascaro, & Futterman, 1976; Pascaro, Futterman & Halsweig, 1976). The closest research that has been done in this area is with LSD back in the 50s and 60s. Virtually all double-blind controlled studies that have been done with LSD in the treatment of alcoholism have met mixed reviews by the scientific community. There has been short term or "afterglow" improvement in patients which diminishes with time (Halpern, 1996). It is important to note that most of these studies only measured drug effect with no appropriate clinical direction and support. (Smart & Strom, 1964; Hollister et al., 1969; Ludwig et al., 1969; Mottin, 1973).

The Native American Church, on the other hand, offers a combination of elements that used in conjunction with one another, form the basis of a holistic treatment model that takes the entire individual into account. Peyote is seen as a medicine by the native peoples who use it. They believe that the controlled religious use of

this medicine will allow them to see the truth about their lives and that the peyote spirit is able to give them guidance and direction. If you sit quietly and still the mind the voice of the spirit will come through and give you guidance. If the insights that you receive are not immediately apparent there are elders and spiritual leaders who can interpret such matters. Peyote is another one of the herb medicines in the Native American pharmacopoeia. It is viewed as a healing agent and a psychic integrator. It has the ability to integrate mind, body, spirit, and emotion in a safe, socially sanctioned, religious setting.

The main elements of the ceremony have been variously described as the master or guide, the ritual group session and the psychotropic drug. Through the use of these elements, heightened susceptibility to suggestion, cathartic expression and managed states of consciousness can be achieved. This in turn leads to the lowering of defense mechanisms and the breaking down of denial systems, which is a major component of any treatment for substance abuse.

There has been some mention made in the literature of the pharmacological addiction-blocking effect of peyote. In a 1977 article in *Clinical Toxicology*, Dr. Kenneth Blum lays out a possible rationale for the addiction-blocking qualities of peyote. His assumption is that certain metabolites of peyote (isoquinolines) are identical to the metabolites produced by heroin and alcohol. DR. Blum did some of the pioneering work into the connection between opiate addiction and late stage alcoholism. He has said that his exploration into this area was left hanging with the loss of research funding for all such projects in the late 70s. He believes there is a connection between peyote and its use as an addictive blocking treatment for alcoholism but also admits that more work needs to be done (Personal Conversation, 1996; Blum, Futterman, & Pascaros, 1977).

The debate over the mechanism for alcoholism has gone back and forth within the scientific community. Isoquinolines and endorphins have been the two main substances studied over the past twenty years, with a recent growing interest in a dopamine

connection. The question is divided and research into the pharmacological effects of peyote is sorely lacking.

Here in Arizona, the Peyote Foundation, with the cooperation of the Multidisciplinary Association for Psychedelic Studies (MAPS), local Native American Church leaders and myself are planning a study to measure the effect of Native American Church peyotism on alcohol abuse. The details of the patient recruitment and exact research design are in the planning stages now. This would be the first controlled study of the effects of Native American Church Peyotism on alcohol abuse: a first step in affirming or denying the many anecdotal reports of sobriety achieved through participation in the Church. •

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TRADITIONAL REHABILITATIVE THERAPY:

A look into the positive therapeutic potential of the Native American Church peyote ceremony

Leo Mercado, Peyote Foundation

IMAGINE THIS; a fireside therapeutic setting, a glowing tipi in the starry Sonoran Desert night. The sweetness of cedar smoke fills the air with a palpable sense of something beyond, something sacred. Tobacco and sagebrush also present themselves to the senses, earnestly venerated as they hold their proper places among the cardinal elements of fire, water, earth, and sky. The Holy Psychedelic Sacrament is passed among the participants who encircle the fire, each person taking as needed to help in this night of physical, emotional, and spiritual healing. Attended by sincere and attentive friends and relatives, and colored with heartfelt song and ceremony, verbal expressions

of one's state of heart touches every person present throughout the night, as well as into the following day and beyond. This is the flavor of what occurs in the Native American Church tipi each weekend throughout the United States and Canada.

The benevolent effect of the peyote religion among Native Americans has been documented from the very inception of the Native American Church. It is very common, when attending a peyote ceremony, to hear testimonial accounts of various physical and emotional maladies being lifted by the healing power of these rituals. Peyote meetings are often "put up" for those in need of healing from drug and alcohol addiction, frequently with great

success. These ceremonies and their beneficial effects have not been limited to tribal or reservation use, but have become increasingly common among people of diverse ethnic backgrounds. This passive evangelization has occurred partly through generations of inter-marriage, and by the very need of traditional faith and therapy among extended family members and friends. Despite the cosmopolitan nature of the approximately 300,000 member church, most people are reminded of this valuable healing tradition only by the occasional news story involving a legal revision, an arrest, or other non-therapeutic/spiritual question regarding peyote. Though our society might dismiss psychedelic healing ceremonies as a foreign or archaic concept at best, these traditional ways continue to provide deep therapeutic experiences for many people in locations that are often not distant from urban America.

The peyote ritual, and the life that accompanies it, is often described as a "hard road." It is certainly not for everybody, as real commitments are required, even in the need to devote oneself to the demanding physical task of sitting attentively for a twelve hour ceremonial session which involves ingesting a decidedly unpalatable sacramental substance. Following through on the insights provided is yet another matter, demanding earnest effort on the individual's part. Yet those who do feel drawn to improve themselves through this opportunity may also infuse positive change into the world around them. It is the hope and prayer of many of us who share these ways, that sincere people may continue to benefit from this traditional form of sacred therapy.

One strong factor in the success of the Native American Church is the support group of fellow participants which goes along with each ceremony. The depth of shared worship, problems prayed for, solutions offered, old pain relinquished, and self-worth retrieved, can affect highly charged bonds among communicants. New friends and relations are emotionally established by the very act of participating actively in each other's therapy and sacred ritual. It is quite common to take on "adopted" parents, uncles, brothers, sisters, and nephews over a period of time. This Native American Church family becomes closely intertwined in the realities of each other's daily lives, as well as in the sharing of their shortcomings, their hopes, and their dreams. This extended family exists as an ongoing support system, oftentimes more present and consistent than even blood-relations who do not participate in the spiritual unfolding which occurs under the tipi canvas.

The very tangible regenerative effects of this "traditional peyote therapy" have recently been aided and secured for the future by the members and staff of MAPS, the members of The Peyote Foundation, and the officers and members of the Native American Church. A special research assistance fund from MAPS has provided The Peyote Foundation with a beautiful Native American Church tipi, crafted by Lee Grey, a Navajo Road Man (peyote minister). A dedication meeting was held to commemorate it on Father's Day on June 14-15, 1997. This has helped literally open the sacred door to people in need, who might not formerly have had access to the blessings and therapeutic possibilities of the Peyote Ceremony. This dedicated traditional structure will provide a neutral zone for future research into the

potential long-term effects of ritualized peyote use by people suffering from alcoholism and substance abuse. Previously, published reports indicating noticeably positive indications of this potential were mostly ethnographical in nature, some anecdotal, none with long-term follow up of participants or standard control methods. We are in preparation for a formal study regarding clinically diagnosed sufferers of alcoholism who participate in a series of Native American Church ceremonies, as compared to a matched group who do not participate in the peyote therapy. This study will be overseen and conducted by John McClusky, M.S.W. of Arizona State University. (see page 3).

Already the Peyote Foundation tipi is providing for ongoing services of various chapters of the Native American Church and the members of the Peyote Foundation. Recently, a Native American Church group in El Paso, Texas asked for our assistance and was provided with transport and use of the Foundation tipi in a ceremony held in a state park outside of the city. We also were able to provide the tipi for a meeting held on a local reservation. This event was sponsored by the family of a young man who was in need of prayer, support, and counseling because of problems with substance abuse. The results of this and other similar situations have been very positive.

A full schedule of Native American Church services is now being conducted under the comforting and majestic shelter of the new tipi at the facilities of The Peyote Foundation in Southern Arizona. Many of these ceremonies directly involve the need for new insight into addictive physical and emotional patterns of behavior. Meaningful reflection into the nature, meaning, and purpose of our lives are richly given with the wonderful entheogenic guidance of the ancient and wise peyote sacrament, and the supportive atmosphere of helpful and experienced people. Throughout the course of the night, each person in attendance becomes an important part of the therapeutic ceremony, a friendly counselor, learning their own strengths and weaknesses as they go, while at the same time offering encouragement to those whose problems we can constructively empathize with. As the morning sun rises into the tipi door, we all leave the sacred circle, bless ourselves in the radiant sunshine, and warmly welcome each of our friends and relations into the light of a new day.

The Peyote Foundation was initiated in 1996 with the goals of Education, Conservation, and Inspiration. As acting president and co-founder of this public service, conservatory, and religious organization, I offer my sincere thanks to MAPS, the members of The Peyote Foundation, and the members and officers of the Native American Church, without whose continuing assistance this work would remain only a hopeful vision of possibility. In the future, I will continue to report on the progress of this contemporary journey into traditional healing. •

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