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Beautiful Flowers: Women and Peyote in Indigenous Traditions

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THE FOCUS OF THIS ARTICLE is to elucidate the unique roles women have in peyote religious practices of the Wixárika (Huichol Indians) of Mexico and the Native American Church (NAC) in North America and Canada. Special consideration is given to the meanings associated with these female practitioners/participants in spiritual terms and physical experiences. In Wixárika thought, flowers symbolize both women and peyote (*Lophophora williamsii*, a small spineless cactus which contains mescaline) (Figure 1). Flowers exude beauty, are indicators of fertility, and, through their reproductive anatomy, give new life via seeds. Women, likewise, have the wondrous ability to bring new life into the world. Akin to Wixárika notions of femaleness, women in NAC traditions personify the feminine essence in NAC peyote ceremonies. I will emphasize Wixárika peyote traditions

because of my extensive fieldwork among women in that culture.¹ My intention is to bring awareness about entheogens in women's lives. Based on my own and other women's experiences I also briefly explore the interaction of peyote with female physiology, which is fundamental to this relationship.



Figure 1. Peyote in flower. Photo by Keeper Trout.

WOMEN AND PEYOTE ORIGIN MYTHS

Wixárika myths lay the foundation for beliefs about women and their roles in the culture. One origin myth of the pilgrimage to the Peyote Desert in San Luis Potosí, tells of the Earth Goddess, Utianaka, and how she manifested the path to Wirikuta through the designs she wove on her loom. She, and two other goddesses, Yuawime and Wiri'uwi, traveled far from their Sierra homelands to the desert.² Upon arriving, Yuawime stayed behind while

¹ I have been carrying out fieldwork since 1979 among the Wixárika people of the Sierra community of San Andrés Cohamita, Jalisco. During my doctoral research on Wixárika women I lived in this community with Wixárika families for a total of three years. I also spent significant time in the Sierra over two sabbatical periods as well. In total, I have gone on four pilgrimages with Wixárika to Wirikuta. Every year I visit the community and families and continue to learn more about Wixárika culture (See Schaefer 2015a).

My fieldwork with members of the NAC revolved around the Peyote Gardens of South Texas and the life of Mrs. Amada Cardeñas, the first federally licensed dealer to legally sell peyote to members of the NAC. I began this research in 1992 and learned about the NAC from the perspective of Mrs. Cardenas and those who came to her home in Mirando City to visit, pray to the peyote, hold ceremonies on her property, and acquire peyote to take

home. I met NAC people from many tribes and feel fortunate to have been able to participate in more than two dozen meetings on Mrs. Cardeñas' property (See Schaefer 2015b).

² Anthropologists in the 1890s through the 1930s indicate that Wixárika women may not have gone on the pilgrimage to Wirikuta (Lumholtz 1900, 1902; Zingg 1938). Instead, they stayed in the Sierra with the children, praying for a successful pilgrimage and the safe return of their men. As is customary in present times, upon the arrival of the pilgrims, the women and families who stayed behind most likely were given peyote collected specifically for them to eat. Now women go on pilgrimages, often with their husbands and a few of their children. Some women go to learn from the peyote how to become shamans.

Wiri'uwi accompanied the Earth Goddess into Wirikuta where they encountered peyote (Figure 2). They ingested this little grey-green cactus and learned of its psychoactive powers. The Earth Goddess traveled back to her Sierra homelands to share this remarkable cactus with her community. Wiri'uwi remained in Wirikuta and became the "Mother of Peyote." Thus began the Wixárika peyote traditions; every year Wixáritari (plural) make the pilgrimage to Wirikuta to relive their history, leave offerings, commune with the gods and goddesses, and harvest peyote to share with their communities back home (Figure 3).

There are various versions of the peyote origin myth recounted by NAC members. In times past a Native American woman wandered through unknown lands. In some accounts she was looking for her lost brothers; in other versions she had a daughter or a little boy with her and they were lost trying find and rejoin their tribe (Perez 2009). Exhaustion overcame the woman and she lay down on the ground. She saw a peyote plant in a dream and it spoke to her. When she awoke she discovered the plant and ate it. The spirit of the peyote told her how to find her lost relatives and she shared peyote with them. After they

had eaten, "the peyote told them how to run a meeting, told what things to use, and how to do it" (Parsons 1936:64). This heroine is known as Peyote Woman.

In both origin myths the main actor is a woman; she is searching, and her personal quest enables her to have a supernatural encounter with the peyote plant. Realizing its powerful, beneficial qualities, she takes peyote back to share with her community, initiating the rituals and ceremonies revolving around this psychoactive plant that exist today.

WOMEN'S ROLES IN PEYOTE CEREMONIES

Among the Wixárika, the ceremony that begins the series of rituals that pertain to the pilgrimage to the peyote desert involves weaving a small bag (*wainuri*) in the native temple to carry the first leaves harvested from the sacred tobacco. This ritual recreates the event of the Earth Goddess materializing (on her loom) the path to Wirikuta. The last peyote ceremony of the season, called "Dance of the Peyote," also takes place in the temple. Adorned with a shaman's plume secured with a woven band around their heads, women toast corn as ceremonial food and grind dried peyote plants, which they mix together with water into a frothy ritual beverage.

Women exchange food, drink, and peyote with their female companions and dance together, arms around each other's shoulders, while the men dance with their companions in a long line that moves around the sacred fire where the shaman and his assistants sing (Figure 4). Women who have gone on the pilgrimage paint designs on each other's faces with yellow paint made from the ground root of the desert plant *'uxa*. This is so the gods can easily recognize them by their designs. Peyote visions women experience are understood to be communications from the gods, and women are encouraged to duplicate these in embroidered and woven designs to visually share with



Figure 2 (top left). Drawing by Estela Hernandez depicting the origin myth of the pilgrimage by the goddesses to Wirikuta. Note that the women standing, Wiri'uwi on the left, and Utüanaka on the right, are pregnant. The sitting woman, Yuawime, has a barren womb; Figure 3 (bottom left). Female shaman praying over the first harvested peyote of the pilgrimage in Wirikuta; Figure 4 (right). Women companions dancing together during Dance of the Peyote ceremony. Photos by Stacy B. Schaefer.

their families and community (Figure 5). Some women under the effect of peyote break into spontaneous song and are highly esteemed; it is well understood that peyote has facilitated the creative link for them to receive these songs from the gods and share them with their families and temple members.

In NAC meetings the ritual role of Water Woman is fundamental to the ceremony; she is the embodiment of Peyote Woman (Figures 6 and 7). Oftentimes the Water Woman is the wife of the roadman who runs the ceremony, or a female relative. Dressed in her finest with her shawl gracefully draped over



Figure 5. Embroidered bag made by Andrea Minjares depicting peyote visions. Photo by Stacy B. Schaefer.

her shoulders, the Water Woman brings sacred water at midnight and again in the morning. At that time, the woman enters the teepee, kneels before the fire, takes a ritual smoke from a hand-rolled tobacco cigarette, and prays out loud. The thoughts she expresses are eloquent, heart-felt, and full of wisdom. She is like a moral compass, sharing good thoughts and inspiration on how to live an honorable, meaningful, life. Food prepared by the Water Woman and her female assistants is then brought in, and the participants eat this ritual food that nourishes their bodies after fasting and wakefulness for the all-night ceremony.³

In both peyote traditions, women are nurturers, providing food and drink, prayer and song to their families and community members. They are highly regarded for their creativity, which is shared publicly in the peyote-inspired imagery with which Wixárika women adorn the textiles they create and the songs they sing. The Water Woman in the NAC ceremony shares wisdom and moral teachings in her inspiring oratory on how to live an honorable life following the Peyote Road.⁴

PEYOTE AND WOMEN'S BODIES

As we have seen through these peyote myths, ritual roles, art, song, and prayers, the female archetypal themes of community, nurturing, and creativity, are ever present. These concepts are also deeply intertwined when examining the physiological level of women, their bodies, and the ingestion of peyote. In these indigenous peyote traditions, many women consume peyote throughout the various stages of their life cycle. Some even consume peyote during their pregnancies, a practice that I have discussed in various publications. (Schaefer 1996b, 2011, 2017). The following paragraphs provide a very preliminary look into how peyote seems to interact with the female reproductive system.

In the Wixárika myth, the Earth Goddess and her two female companions traveled to Wirikuta. As they were about to enter the Peyote Desert, the Earth Goddess and the woman who became the Mother of Peyote began to menstruate indicating that they were fertile. The third goddess, Yuawime, had a barren womb and was forbidden from entering Wirikuta. Instead she turned into a rock in the desert landscape. After the Earth Goddess and her companion entered Wirikuta and consumed peyote, they both became pregnant.

According to Wixárika beliefs, a tremendous amount of

³ In the past, most NAC meetings excluded women. Over time they were allowed to attend. (La Barre 1989: 41, 46, 55, 60).

⁴ It appears that in the early years of the NAC religion if women attended meetings they did not sing. Nowadays in NAC meeting some women will sing. (Maroukis 210:178) Like men, they hold the roadman's staff and sage, shake the gourd rattle as they sing and are accompanied at their side by the drummer on the water drum. At the meetings I attended it was not uncommon for participants to be from various tribes and peyote traditions, and inevitably the make up of the people in the meeting was predominately roadmen and their wives. In this setting a few women would sing; other times singing by women was discouraged. A few NAC women told me that at their NAC meetings back home it was more common for women to sing.

heat emanates from menstruating women, and that could spoil peyote plants. Women who menstruate while in Wirikuta undergo a ritual in which a lock of hair at the crown of the head is cut by the shaman to “calm the heat from the menstrual blood.” I learned of this practice because on several occasions when I went on the pilgrimage, some Wixárika women began to menstruate. I was surprised that this also occurred to me on a few pilgrimages; I began my menstrual cycle earlier than anticipated. I underwent the hair cutting ritual along with these women. The officiating shaman specialized in fertility; later she told me this was a good sign for preparing a woman to become pregnant. I also found that consuming peyote during ceremonies in the Wixárika Sierra frequently caused me to get my period, even when it was out-of-sync with my cycle (Schaefer 2017:228).

NAC taboo prohibits menstruating women from participating in the tipi meetings. At times, when I attended these meetings and consumed peyote, I would unexpectedly get my period. I learned from other women who were in the meeting that they had also begun to menstruate (Schaefer *ibid*:229). No formal scientific research has been conducted on the effects of peyote, or even mescaline, on human female hormones. However, professional midwives, Juanita Nelson and Maria Victoria Mangini, who participate in peyote ceremonies and attend to mothers who also ingest peyote, shared with me their empirically informed thoughts on this phenomenon.⁵ They both believe that peyote alkaloids activate the release of progesterone. Synthetic progesterone has been used to treat menstrual problems and difficult pregnancies. (Redig 2003, Hahnet.al. 2009). Juanita Nelson confirmed that if a woman eats peyote

and is close to menstruating, she will get her period. Similarly, if a woman is off-cycle, she can also get her period. Based on her experiences at NAC meetings, she also explains that “pregnant women who eat peyote have very little problem with miscarriage,” and that “it helps establish the placenta and maturation of the fetus” (Schaefer *ibid*:229).

One version of the NAC Peyote Woman story tells that the

⁵ Juanita Nelson, L.M., R.M., C.P.M., is a certified professional midwife who is director of Community Midwives in Durango, Colorado which serves the Four Corners Region. She has been involved with the NAC for more than 30 years, during many of which she was the wife of a prominent roadman.

Mariavittoria Mangini, Ph.D., FNP, is an Associate Professor at Holy Names University and a Nurse Practitioner and Advanced Practice Midwife. She practices in the San Francisco Bay area of California and is very knowledgeable about peyote.



Figure 6 (bottom left). Artwork depicting women in the tipi and the water bird emerging from the fire, artist unknown; Figure 7 (top). Cedar box of Mrs. Amada Cardenas. Note the feather fans and the peyote chief button made by Mrs. Cardenas; Figure 8 (bottom right). Woman nursing child while participating in Dance of the Peyote Ceremony. Photos by Stacy B. Schaefer.



Figure 9. Peyote (*L. jourdaniana*) in fruit. Photo by Keeper Trout.

woman who was lost in the desert was pregnant and starving. As she goes into labor, “something tells her to eat peyote. She then delivers a child easily.” (Mount 1987:14 in Perez 2009:3). Scientific research has revealed that the mescaline in peyote interacts with serotonin receptors in the human body, particularly 5HT2A (Nichols 2012:566). Stimulation of these receptors induces vasoconstriction in the uterus. Serotonin also interfaces with the smooth muscle in the uterus and can induce contractions (Lychkova, et. al. 2014; Nandkumar et. al. 1972; Dyer and Gant 1973).

After Peyote Woman eats peyote and delivers her baby, her hunger is gone and her breasts are full of milk. Prolactin, a hormone that promotes the production of breast milk, is also found to be stimulated with the ingestion of mescaline. (Demisch

⁶ Peyote flowers played a pivotal role in my learning about this psychoactive cactus. On my first pilgrimage, I was unsure how to find peyote. An old wise shaman with the group explained to me “sometimes it is not so easy to find peyote when it is not flowering. If one finds a few with flowers he is very lucky.” He taught me how to look for this reclusive little cactus. He harvested several peyote and, one of the plants had a little pinkish-lavender flower blooming on top. He picked the flower, pressed it to my eyes, put it in my mouth and told me in a soft but sure voice, “eat this flower of the peyote...it will help you, it will guide you to find many beautiful peyotes.” Within minutes I miraculously began to see peyote all around me (Schaefer 1996:147–148).

and Neubauer 1979) According to the scientific studies, the oral administration of mescaline also affected the 5HT2A serotonin receptors and triggered the secretion of prolactin more than four-fold above base level. (Smith accessed 7/20/17). Some Wixárika women tell me that eating peyote when nursing increases the amount of breast milk they have for their children (Figure 8).

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, women in Wixárika and NAC cultures are central to their peyote traditions. The eminent females who discovered peyote and initiated the ceremonies, Utüanaka the Earth goddess and her companion Wiri’uwi for the Wixárika, and Peyote Woman for the NAC reflect the beliefs that connect peyote and feminine principals. The actual roles women have in these religious traditions reinforce the ideas of women as essential to the welfare of their communities. Women are also recognized for their creative endeavors

be it art, song, or oratory; on a biological level they are esteemed for their reproductive abilities. Flowering peyote produce a fleshy pink sack (fruit) in the center of the plant⁶ (Figure 9). Like peyote, women are seen in Wixárika ideology as beautiful flowers; the fruit of the peyote metaphorically represents the human female uterus. The mysteries of how peyote interacts with the female body and hormone system is worthy of further study; what little we know points to a synergy between the plant and women, one that promotes fertility and well-being for mothers and their ability to bring healthy babies into the world. 🌱

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