

## San Pedro, Peyote, and Mescaline: A Visionary Catalyst for Healing

An informative article on mescaline-containing cacti, including history and anthropology of San Pedro (Huachuma) and Peyote cultural practices.

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Western society has a negative view of hallucinogenic drugs and the psychedelic experiences that they produce. Hallucinogenic drugs are seen as inherently worthless and inherently dangerous, producing negative societal changes. In contrast to this view is the fact that hallucinogenic plants have been used as religious sacrament, healing medicine, and spiritual guides for thousands of years. As an example of beneficial use of a plant hallucinogen, I will use the ancient traditional healing ceremonies, ceremonies still functioning today, which use the San Pedro cactus (*Trichocereus pachanoi*). The key factor in the use of the cactus is the mescaline that it contains. The hallucinogenic effects of the mescaline is necessary for the healing ceremony to function properly. The beneficial use of psychedelic effects in the San Pedro cactus healing ritual contrasts with the negative associations society has about hallucinogens.

The legal statutes and the societal taboo against researching the effects of plant hallucinogens is an example of the general attitude toward plants with psychoactive effects. These laws and opinions are crippling mostly to those who want to preserve traditional knowledge about beneficial plants. These laws and attitudes have come about because of misinformation about the psychedelics as well as widespread misuse of them. The consciousness expanding abilities of psychedelic drugs is stated well in this quote from Terence McKenna, in *Whole Earth Review* (Fall, 1989). He says that, "Re-establishing direct channels of communication with the planetary other, the mind behind Nature, through the use of hallucinogenic plants is the last, best hope for dissolving the steep walls of cultural inflexibility that appear to be channeling us toward true ruin. Careful exploration of the plant hallucinogens will probe the most archaic and sensitive levels of the drama of the emergence of consciousness."

Thus McKenna notes that, "**The pro-psychedelic plant position is clearly an anti-drug position. Drug dependencies are the result of habitual, unexamined and obsessive behavior; these are precisely the tendencies that the psychedelics mitigate.**" McKenna is clearly advocating responsible psychedelic plant use, and not advocating drug abuse.

Shamans all over the world and in different cultures have traditionally used psychoactive plants, especially psychedelics, for guidance, decision making, healing, spirituality enhancing experiences and remaining in balance with the natural world. It is very important to keep in mind that, "a plant using shaman is far more than a witch-doctor who gets wiggled out on drugs; he or she is a healer, experimentalist, and psycho pomp. Anyone who seeks to understand the dimensions of the shaman's healing system without understanding the place of psychoactive plants is going to miss a vital factor" (Rheingold, 27).

It is interesting to note that the shamans who use the plants claim that much of the knowledge is gained directly from the plants. One example is that psychedelic plants are claimed to have taught melodies to those who ingest them. This is found with San Pedro using shamans, Ayahuasca drinkers in the Amazon, the Mazatec who use hallucinogenic mushrooms, and the Huichols who use Peyote (McKenna, 30).

The key hallucinogenic alkaloid in the San Pedro cactus is mescaline. Mescaline is unique among drugs in that its main action is a stimulant of the visual and visuo-psychic areas of the cortex (Kluver, 65). This lets the brain experience an altered state of consciousness. Mescaline is also found in many other cacti and succulents, including the well known Peyote cactus.

The largest part of the mescaline experience is experienced visually, through hallucinations. Most hallucinatory phenomena are usually variations of certain forms. These form constants are:

1. a) grating, lattice, fretwork, filigree, honeycomb, or chessboard;
2. b) cobweb;
3. c) tunnel, funnel, alley, cone or vessel;
4. d) spiral.

The fineness of the lines is often stressed. They are so thin that it is hard to say whether they are black or white. These form constants are also seen in other altered states. One observer has seen the same hallucinatory constants during four different childhood sicknesses. This has led him to conclude, "All the geometric forms and designs characteristic of mescaline-induced phenomena can, under proper conditions, be entoptically observed" (Kluver, 65). Some of the form constants are also found in, "the visual phenomena of insulin hypoglycemia, and in phenomena induced by simply looking at disks with black, white, or colored sectors rotating at certain speeds" (Kluver, 65). These hallucinatory forms have also been reported from migraine attacks.

One author tries to account for the different form constants by referring to the various structures in the eye. He concludes from anatomical and observed data that, "the rods and foveal cones can look backwards and that the retinal pigment and the choriocapillary circulation can, therefore, be seen under certain conditions" (Kluver, 65). In essence, our hallucinations are views of looking backward at the retina, according to this theory. This would explain the prevalence of lines in mescaline hallucinations. Mescaline intoxication is a complicated and somewhat incomprehensible thing. These accounts are taken from experiments done with Peyote in the 1920's. I am using these accounts on the assumption that the psychedelic mescaline experience will be fairly uniform, regardless of the plant used. It is important to understand that no written account can adequately describe the experience. The form constants experienced with mescaline intoxication overlap into the sensory sphere of experience.

A Professor Forster felt a net-like "cobweb" on his tongue. Another subject felt that his legs were spirals. For him, the spiral of his leg blended with another spiral that was rotating in the visual field. "One has the sensation of somatic and optic unity" (Kluver, 71). Lines are one of the most prevalent things seen while under the influence of mescaline. This is often seen as a "lattice" or "fretwork. A physician, Dr. Beringer was conducting an experiment involving mescaline. One of his subjects stated that:

He saw fretwork before his eyes, his arms, hands, and fingers turned into fretwork and that he became identical with the fretwork. There was no difference between the fretwork and himself, between inside and outside. All objects in the room and the walls changed into fretwork and thus became identical with him. While writing, the words turned into fretwork and there was, therefore, an identity of fretwork and handwriting. 'The fretwork is I.' In other people the "lattice", or "fretwork" became so dominant that it appeared to dominate the whole personality. All ideas turned into glass fretwork, which he saw, thought, and felt. He also felt, saw, tasted, and smelled tones that became fretwork. He himself was the tone (Kluver, 72).

Weir Mitchell took an extract of one and one half Peyote buttons and he eventually saw: A white spear of grey stone grew up to huge height, and became a tall, richly furnished Gothic tower of very elaborate and definite design, with many rather worn statues standing in the doorways or on stone brackets. As I gazed every projecting angle, cornice, and even the face of the stones at their joinings were by degrees covered or hung with clusters of what seemed to be huge precious stones, but uncut. These were green, purple, red, and orange; never clear yellow and never blue. All seemed to possess interior light, and to give the faintest idea of the perfectly satisfying intensity and purity of these gorgeous colors is quite beyond my power. As I looked, and it lasted long, the tower became of a fine mouse

hue, and everywhere the vast pendant masses of emerald green, ruby red, and orange began to drip a slow rain of colors. Here were miles of rippled purple, half transparent and of ineffable beauty. Now and then soft golden clouds floated from these folds (Kluver, 16). This quote is from someone who had been injected with .2 gm of the sulfate of mescaline by physicians: A steel veil the meshes of which are constantly changing in size and form...beads in different colors...red, brownish, and violet threads running together in center...gold rain falling vertically... regular and irregular forms in iridescent colors resembling shells and sea urchins... transparent oriental rugs, but infinitely small...wallpaper designs...countless rugs with such magnificent hues and such singular brilliancy that I cannot even imagine them now...cobweb like figures or concentric circles and squares...the pyramid of the tower of a Gothic dome... architectural forms, buttresses, rosettes, leafwork, fretwork, and circular patterns...modern cubistic patterns...gammadia forms from the points of which radiate innumerable lines in the forms of screws and spirals, in flashes and calm curves, a kaleidoscopic play of ornaments, patterns, crystals and prisms which creates the impression of a never-ending uniformity...hexagonal small honeycombs hung down from the ceiling...incessant play of filigreed colors... in the face of B I saw a lattice of yellow-greenish horizontal stripes (Kluver, 17).

The power of mescaline to completely change reality temporarily can be seen in the following experience of Henri Michaux. He mistakenly took a dose of the sulfate of mescaline that was about six times his normal dose.

It was where one is nothing but oneself, it was there that, with mad speed, hundreds of lines of force combed my being which could never re-integrate itself quickly enough, for, before it could come together again, another line of rakes began raking it, and then again, and then again. Intense beyond intensity, the struggle, and I, active as never before in my life, miraculously surpassing myself, but surpassed out of all proportion by the dislocating phenomenon.

Enormous Z's are passing through me (stripes- vibrations-zig-zags?). Then, either broken S's, or what may be their halves, incomplete O's, a little like giant eggshells.

I have once more become a passage, a passage in time. This then was the furrow with the fluid in it, absolutely devoid of viscosity, and that is how I pass from second 51 to second 52, to second 53, then to second 54 and so on. It is my passage forward (Michaux, 65).

I found one account of the effects of San Pedro in particular. This account is short, and obviously this is only a fraction of the total mescaline experience, but it does agree with the experience of the mescaline in Peyote.

The effects of San Pedro are: ...first a slight dizziness that one hardly notices. And then a great vision, a clearing of all the faculties of the individual. It produces a light numbness in the body and afterward a tranquillity. And then comes a detachment, a type of visual force in the individual inclusive of all the senses: seeing, hearing, smelling, touching, etc-all the senses, including the sixth sense, the telepathic sense of transmitting oneself across time and matter... It develops the power of perception...in the sense that when one wants to see something far away...he can distinguish powers or problems or disturbances at a great distance, so as to deal with them (Furst, 130).

The San Pedro cactus (aka Huachuma), *Trichocereus pachanoi*, is native to several places in South America. It is found in Southern Ecuador at the Chanchan valley ranging from 6,600-9,000 feet. In Peru, in the Huancabamba valley and in Quebrada Santa Cruz at 10,800 ft. It grows naturally in these locales, but is cultivated all over Peru and in other places in South America. *T. pachanoi* has a tree like body, 10-20 ft high, up to 4" in diameter and several branches starting from the base. It is bluish green, and frosted at first. It has 4-7 ribs, which are broad and rounded, with slight transverse depressions over the small areoles. There are 1-4 spines per areole, very small or completely absent, and dark yellow to

brown. The flower is funnel shaped, to 9.8" long and 7.9" in diameter. It is white with a light green tinge. The alkaloid, mescaline, is contained in the top 1/2 inch of skin. Alkaloids in other cacti serve as seedling inhibitors and parasite repellents. This is probably true of San Pedro as well. The mescaline comprises .12% of the whole fresh plant material. This is approximately 1.2 grams of mescaline per kilo. Mescaline is also found in 10 other *Trichocereus* species, some of which are used in the way that *T. pachanoi* is (Ostolaza, 102).

Awareness of the psycho-spiritual nature of the San Pedro cactus has been documented for a minimum of around 3000 years. Engraved stone carvings, at Chavin, date to 1300 B.C. They portray a figure holding sections of the cactus. Representations of San Pedro also show up on Moche ceramics, Nazca urns and Chimu ceramics. It has been suggested that cacti were under cultivation in Peru as early as 200 B.C. (Davis, 368). Establishing continuity between pre-Columbian use of this cactus and present day use is challenging. When the European explorers first landed in South America, their religion, Christianity, dramatically changed the indigenous cultures. European Christianity literally invaded the original region where the use of San Pedro indigenously evolved. "Under such pressures, the indigenous religious practices, including the utilization of *Trichocereus pachanoi*, undoubtedly were transformed" (Davis, 372). In Peru, in Huancabamba, the post-colonial culture has replaced indigenous cultures. The San Pedro healing cult has survived, but is quite different than it was. In fact, the name "San Pedro" refers to Saint Peter of the Roman Catholic Church who is considered to be the keeper of the gates to Heaven.

Early observers saw that the San Pedro cult was so Christian that they erroneously concluded that it represented a strictly post-contact, colonial phenomenon (Davis, 372). However, the archaeological evidence points to elements of the original ceremonies in the ceremonies I am reporting on.

To understand the roots of San Pedro healing cult we need to understand the assumptions of South American shamanism in general. The elements are:

1. The belief in spirit guardians.
2. The notion of particular places animistically endowed with supernatural power.
3. The concept of physical combat with disease demons or spirits.
4. The close association of certain magical plants with spiritual power.
5. The belief in spiritual or supernatural forces as the causal agents of illness (Davis 371).

The healing role is performed by the shaman, or curandero. The shaman's world view is central to the meaning and function of the healing ritual. To the curandero, the existence of opposite forces does not mean splitting the world in two (the 'Sacred' and 'Profane') or establishing a rigid dichotomy between 'this' world of matter and the 'other' world of spirit. On the contrary, the curandero seeks to perceive unity in the dynamic interaction between the forces of good and evil through the attainment of 'vision'. Such a view of the world is very flexible and adaptable; it leaves room for the acceptance of new symbols and ideas and allows competing elements to enter into one's structuring of reality and the behavior determined by such structuring (Furst, 123).

For example, this view allows the shaman to see no contradiction between modern medicine and traditional curing. Nor does he see modern medicine as a threat to his vocation. He is seeking to assimilate scientific knowledge and techniques into practice by taking correspondence courses and reading medical literature. Basically, if he knows more about modern medicine, he will be more adept at healing people with San Pedro. The reasons that people wish a shaman to perform the ritual are diverse. They can be physical illness, or simply bad luck. In any case, the assumption is that there are spiritual forces which are causing these problems. In a ritual performed in Peru, on the night of February 15, 1981, the patients had these problems:

\* A girl who has been paralyzed, who also had back pain, stomach pain, and great depression.

\* A family's cattle herd had got diseased and been reduced from 58 to 6.

\* An aunt recently gone mad.

\* A businessman who wanted to know who had embezzled from his business.

\* Insanity caused by seeing a wife in the arms of another man (Davis, 372).

Briefly, the ritual consists of the shaman healing the patients with the conjunction of his own spiritual power, the mescaline which activates his power, and an altar, called a mesa. The mesa is covered with power objects, which are seen as having spiritual energy. The layout of the objects on the mesa is a key structure of the ritual.

**There are three fields on the mesa.** The left is associated with death taking, and the right with life giving. The middle is either a separate field or a neutral zone. In either case, the middle is linked to the concept of balance, of mediating between good and evil. Only some of the shamans consider the two opposite sides good and bad. They are usually considered complementary halves of a whole, neither good or bad. This is a characteristic that is common to many indigenous symbolic systems (Furst, 127). It is important to have the left field, which represents negativity. This is because this is the realm responsible for illness and bad luck, and consequently capable of revealing their sources (Furst, 125). Objects on the left side are sometimes associated with animals such as snakes, deer, monkeys, frogs, foxes, cats, and birds of prey. These power objects usually include things of "Ancestors" (ie: artifacts from archaeological sites), poisonous herbs in bottles, and stones (from places of the dead (cemeteries or archaeological sites) The middle field, or neutral zone is dedicated to finding balance between the two opposite energies. Good luck herbs are placed here and a good luck charm is made during the ritual using these herbs. Balancing fields always have sun images. There are also magnetic or reflective stones. The right field often uses extensive Catholic imagery such as saints, and purificatory waters. Indigenous positive power objects always include medicinal plants, shells (fertility symbols), and the containers of the San Pedro infusion.

In front of the fields there are meditation symbols as well as a representation of the shaman (Joralemon, 22). The symbols on the right side are used to guide the creation of a proper herbal healing mixture. At the back of the mesa are six to twelve upright staffs. These are associated with the respective areas of the mesa they are standing in back of. Each shaman's layout of power objects on the mesa is quite diverse. Some of the various objects I found listed for the three fields are as follows; Right field: stones, shells, bowls, and a rattle. Neutral or balancing field: a bronze sunburst, a stone symbolizing the Sea, and a crystal "mirror". Left field: A deer foot, knives and cane alcohol. Other objects that shamans have used on their mesas include wooden staffs of tropical hardwoods, whale bones, quartz crystals, colonial knives, plastic toy soldiers, pre-columbian ceramics, brass lions and deer, antlers, wild boar tusks, silver plates, murex and helmet shells, dice, statues of the Virgin Mary, and many photos and paintings of Roman Catholic saints. Also, each patient places one personal offering on the altar (Davis, 373). These personal offerings can be things like bottles of alcohol, bottles of scented water and red perfume, or objects to represent other patients who could not come. One man brought coins and hex stones for the proxy of a sick aunt who could not travel (Davis, 372).

The San Pedro healing ritual has always had the certain standard elements that I have been discussing. However, this ritual is also capable of adapting to different times' religious ideas, which is how the original ritual was transformed by Christianity (specifically, Roman Catholicism). The left field became associated with Satan, and the right field with Jesus and Mary. In one mesa structure, the neutral zone was governed by San Ciprio, a saint who was a powerful sorcerer before he converted to Christianity.

All shamans have many power objects they use on the mesa. Despite often being Christian symbols, they function very much like the negative and positive forces and symbols do in native shamanism. The shaman does not consider these objects lifeless. Each is a focus of a particular force. Collectively, they are a projection of his own spiritual power, which

becomes activated whenever the mesa is used in the conjunction with the drinking of the hallucinogenic San Pedro infusion.

The ritual is always done at night. It consists of a lengthy preliminary purification ceremony and then the ritual itself. The ceremonial acts consist of prayers, invocations, and chants (accompanied by the beat of the shamanic rattle), addressed to all the supernaturals of the indigenous and Roman Catholic faiths. At midnight, when the purifying ceremonial acts are complete, there is some preliminary chanting, then all present must drink one to three cups of the ceremonial potion. The shaman takes the first cupful, and then the patients. Usually nothing is added to the San Pedro infusion. However, in cases of illness believed to be caused by sorcery some things may be added. These additional ingredients are usually powdered bones, certain plants, and cemetery dust or dust from archaeological ruins. Also, a purgative potion may be made from another plant which is to be taken after taking the San Pedro drink. Some shamans add strongly psychoactive plants like *Brugmansia* sp. (angel trumpet; tree datura), but this is considered by most to be drastic shock therapy (Furst, 119).

In the beginning phase of the ritual each patient stands before the left side of the altar. As the mescaline begins to take effect, the shaman chants the patients name and visualizes the forms of animals that represent the poisons/problems of the patients. While each patient stands before the mesa and the shaman chants his name, everyone else stares at the staffs behind the mesa. Consensus among the hallucinating patients will be reached as to which staff is vibrating. The shaman then chants with the staff in his hand and this focuses his vision and activates the power of the staff and associated objects on the mesa. This focusing of vision helps the curandero "see" the cause of the patient's problem. This first part of the ritual is essentially to gain control of the negative forces that have been called into play (Furst, 128).

During this first part of the ritual, the shaman may pause to massage or suck on parts of patients bodies to extract the supernatural source of the affliction. In certain very serious cases, the forces which cause the illness are believed to be powerful enough to attack the patient during the curing session. This is dangerous and requires immediate emergency action. The shaman seizes a sword or staff and charges out beyond the mesa and the patients. He then conducts a ferocious battle with the attacking forces, which only he can see in his San Pedro visions. In one ceremony the shaman performs seven somersaults in the form of a cross, while grasping the sword in both hands with the sharp edge held forward. This is intended to drive off the attacking forces and shock the sorcerer who is directing them (Furst, 130).

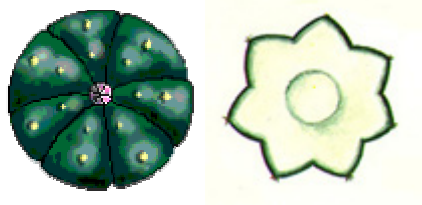
The second part of the ritual is considered the most important part. The central field of the mesa is associated with balance and luck, and there are herbs of good fortune placed in it. Patients appear before the mesa and the shaman identifies which herbs are going to be used for that patient's good luck charm.

The third phase is for identifying the particular herbs that will cure the patients' ailments. These herbs have been placed on the right side. After identification through hallucinations, the shaman tosses some shells as a form of divination to confirm if he made the right choices of herbs (Joralemon, 26). This divination is a basic part of any San Pedro healing ritual. It shows an association between hallucinations, mesa objects, and the element of control that the shaman has over the ritual.

Mesa artifacts are closely linked to mescaline-induced hallucinations in that they serve to anchor visualizations in such a way as to permit their application to the achievement of specific ends. By so controlling the drug experience, the shaman is able to direct the ritual toward healing objectives. In other words, this control allows the shaman to structure the course of a visionary episode so that it leads to the goal of curing (Joralemon, 24).

At the end, some shamans blow perfume, water, sugar, and facial powder over everyone. Then there is a final benediction or prayer. Each participant is presented with the bottle of sacred healing herbs (Davis, 373). The patients are sent on their way.

The San Pedro cactus has a long history of being used for its psychedelic effects. It has often been used for healing in a ritual which evolved in Peru. This ancient ritual represents a journey from life-taking to life-giving forces. This is inherently a positive event. The use of the mescaline in the ritual to achieve this positive result is a welcome contrast to many current negative attitudes towards psychedelic experiences.



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