Texas Peyote Culture

Peyote (*Lophophora williamsii* (Lem.) Coult.) has deep roots in Texas, or a deep taproot to be precise. While Texas is currently home to a federally regulated peyote trade, where members of the Native American Church (NAC) can legally purchase peyote for use in religious ceremonies, archaeological sites in Texas, and neighboring Coahuila, also mark the earliest known ceremonial associations between humans and peyote. It is believed that the peyote rituals of the Huichol, Nahua, Tarahumara, Cora, Tepehuan, and more recently the NAC, all trace their origins to the peyote gardens of Texas (Boyd 2016). Although ceremonial use of peyote is typically associated with the Native American tribes of the United States, or with the Huichol of Mexico, traditions native to Texas are currently being revived by descendants of the Mission Indians (many identifying as Coahuiltecans) living in and around San Antonio. In the following pages, I will endeavor to draw out the various connections between peyote and Texas, beginning with the archaeological evidence, then examining the history of the Coahuiltecan Indians and their influence on the development of the NAC, followed by an examination of the Texas peyote trade, its history and practices, as well as historical uses of peyote in folk remedies of the region.

1. Largest of the three peyote effigies recovered from the Shumla caves, measuring approximately three centimeters in diameter. The peyote effigies are currently on display at the Witte Museum in San Antonio, Texas (Photo by Geoffrey Brune, courtesy of Martin Terry).

Archaeological Findings

Archaeological evidence suggests that peyote may have been used in human rituals for over five thousand years. In the 1930s, peyote buttons were recovered from the Shumla Caves in the Lower Pecos region of southwestern Texas, and were later estimated to date back to between 5,200 and 5,700 years ago (El-Seedi *et al.* 2005; Terry *et al.* 2006). Further investigations have demonstrated that these ancient peyote buttons were not peyote buttons at all, but rather a composite of different plants, including peyote, and apparently shaped to look like peyote buttons (Terry *et al.* 2006). The purpose of these "effigies" has not been identified, but their form and the location of their discovery in a cave, are both suggestive of a religious function (Fig. 1). Caves and rock shelters were also used as a canvas of sorts by pre-historic peoples, and pictographic evidence of ceremonial peyote use, dating back between 2,950 to 4,200 years, has been identified from caves in the same region (Boyd 1996; Boyd & Dering 1996).

Archaeologist Carolyn Boyd, who has studied the rock art of southwestern Texas for over two decades has put forth an argument that a pictograph, popularly known as the *White Shaman Mural* (Figs. 2–4), details the elements of an ancient peyote ceremony,

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2. Section of the White Shaman Mural featuring the White Shaman.

and has drawn on compelling parallels between the images and symbolism of the rock art with modern-day Huichol culture, as well as with historic Nahua mythology (Boyd 2016). Notably, the Shumla caves are only a few miles from the White Shaman Mural.

At a third location, a mortuary site in Coahuila, Mexico, dried peyote buttons strung together like a necklace were discovered. These specimens have been estimated to date between 810 and 1070 AD (Bruhn *et al*. 1978; Terry *et al*. 2006). Each of these three sites is within the boundaries of peyote's known growth range, and they mark the earliest known human associations with this plant. These findings suggest that the peyote cactus was first discovered and used by people in the northern part of its growth range, encompassing southern Texas and northern Coahuila.

The Coahuiltecans

The term Coahuiltecan refers to a broad range of ethnically and linguistically diverse hunting and gathering bands that once ranged through southern Texas and north-eastern Mexico (Thoms 2001). The term was first used to designate groups that were seen as broadly sharing cultural traits and speaking closely related languages, including Coahuilteco and Comecrudo, but is now used more loosely to refer to a number of hunting-gathering bands that lived in this region, without designating specific cultural or linguistic similarities (Thoms 2001). Some Coahuiltecan bands, including the Carrizo, were early ceremonial users of peyote. This Coahuiltecan custom is believed to have been adopted by the Lipan Apache during the nineteenth century, and later spread throughout U.S. Tribes forming the basis of what would later become the Native American Church.

An account provided by a Lipan Apache elder in the 1930s supports the theory that the Plains-style peyote ceremony was originally adapted from a Carrizo ceremony (Opler 1938). While there are plenty of reasons to doubt an account provided about events that took place 100 years earlier, Opler's informant, Antonio Apache, provides a detailed account of the Carrizo ceremony as it was first encountered by the Lipan Apache. The Carrizo ceremony took place in an open clearing, and the ceremonial grounds were swept beforehand and then layered with sage. The ceremony took place at night with a large fire as a focal point. A large peyote button was placed to the west of the fire, and the leader of the ceremony sat behind the peyote (Opler 1938).

According to Antonio Apache, the Carrizo had their ceremony in the open because they did not have

3. View of the arching surface of the White Shaman Mural, and looking out from within the rock shelter.

4. View from the White Shaman rock shelter, looking over the Pecos River near Comstock, Texas.

hides for a tipi. His description of the early Lipan Apache peyote ceremony suggests a transitional ceremonial format, somewhere between the Mexican and current Plains peyote complexes. The introduction of the tipi was a major departure from the Carrizo ceremony, and no food or water was allowed in the tipi. Women were not allowed to participate, as they were among the Carrizo. A large peyote button was also set to the west of the fire, but no altar was constructed. The altar was apparently introduced later and is now a core feature of the Plains complex. This early Lipan Apache ceremony included a ceremonial leader, who sat to the west of the fire, a fire tender who sat to the east, next to the door, and a drummer who would travel around the tipi to accompany the singers. Individuals could get up and dance if they felt so inclined, a practice which appears to be a carry-over from the Carrizo, but which is unusual in the Plains complex.

Further evidence that the Plains-style peyote ceremony was adapted from an earlier Coahuiltecan ceremonial form can be found in traditional NAC peyote songs. Songs sung during NAC ceremonies frequently contain vocables, "sequences of syllables that do not appear to be real words" (Aceves & Garza 2010: 2), but which are recognized as having some long-lost meaning. Within the NAC, there are four required songs that are sung by all Roadmen (NAC ceremonial leaders), regardless of tribal affiliation, and vocables in three of these songs have been demonstrated to phonetically parallel words in the Coahuilteco and Comecrudo languages of South Texas (Aceves & Garza 2010). For example, the Coahuiltecan phrase *xanē yohui* (pron: hey-ney-yo-way), meaning "with all that I am," is frequently used to close a phrase or refrain in peyote songs (Aceves & Garza 2010: 2). The presence of these linguistic artifacts in these obligatory ceremonial songs, is strongly suggestive of a historic link between the present-day NAC ceremony and the historic Coahuiltecan peyote ceremony, and stands in support of corresponding evidence suggesting that the Lipan Apache adopted the ceremony from the Comecrudo speaking Carrizo people.

Most Coahuiltecan bands had disappeared by 1850 (Ruecking 1954). The Carrizo are thought to have persisted somewhat longer, but had likewise disappeared by the 1880s (Stewart 1987). Many individuals from various Coahuiltecan bands, including the *Orejones*, *Pamaques*, *Sanipas* and *Venados*, were absorbed by the various Missions established by the Spanish in and around San Antonio, and their descendants have largely remained in this region. Although Coahuiltecans have lacked any cohesive political or social organization for over 100 years, cultural practices and belief systems have been passed down within families for generations, and there is now a growing revivalist movement among Mission Indian descendants (Indigenous Cultures Institute 2006–2015; Thoms 2001). A significant part of this revival has been the incorporation of multiple Coahuiltecan NAC chapters in the last two decades (Texas Dept. of Public Safety 2013).

Peyote Trade

While the South Texas peyote trade has only been regulated since 1969, the roots of the trade between Hispanic harvesters of the psychoactive cactus and Native American peyotists can be traced to the late 1800s. The earliest written accounts of Hispanic peyote traders appeared in the 1880s (Morgan 1976; Morgan & Stewart1984), while an account by Francisco Canales, a modern peyotero, traces his family's involvement in the peyote trade back to the early 1870s (Morgan & Stewart 1984). This corresponds with records tracing the emergence of peyotism

among Native American tribes, and within the newly established Reservations of that period. The Hispanic communities, having learned of the Native American interest in peyote, were able to harvest large quantities of the cactus and dry them for transport. The ability of the peyoteros to dry the cactus was pivotal to their trade success since the cactus, once dried, was not only lighter but also highly resistant to spoiling, both extreme conveniences for Native Americans traveling long distances by horse, or by foot (Morgan 1976; Morgan & Stewart 1984). By 1881, the Texas-Mexico railway had been completed, as well as another rail line connecting Laredo to the Indian Territory in Oklahoma (Morgan 1976; Morgan & Stewart 1984), thus allowing large quantities of peyote to be shipped. The peyotero practice of desiccation, ensuring the durability of peyote, combined with the ability to ship peyote assisted the development and expansion of peyotism amongst Native Americans and provided the foundation for a vital trade (Morgan 1976; Morgan & Stewart 1984).

Perhaps the most famous of the peyoteros was a woman named Amada Cardenas. Amada began her career as a girl of 10, assisting her father, Esequio Sanchez, with his peyote business in Los Ojuelos, a small community outside of Laredo. In the early 1930s, she married her husband Claudio Cardenas, and together they started their own peyote business. In the 1940s, they moved from their home in Los Ojuelos to Mirando City. Both Amada and Claudio were active in the Church, each taking officer positions in the NAC of the United States in the 1950s. Claudio passed away in 1967, the same year Texas outlawed peyote, effectively ending their profession. Amada persisted, and played a key role in events that would lead to the establishment of the regulated trade in Texas (Schaefer 2015).

In 1968, Amada agreed to participate in a staged peyote purchase, in order to force the issue of Native religious rights in the Texas court system. A young Navajo man named David Clark, agreed to be the purchaser, and allowed himself to be arrested for possession of a "controlled substance." The decision was swift, Judge Kazen, the presiding judge found that "Peyotism is a recognized bona fide religion practiced by the Native American Church, and that peyote is an essential ingredient of the religious ceremony" (Tunnell 2000: 11). Consequently, Kazen ruled that Texas' prohibition could not Constitutionally be applied to Clark. The court case was local and not binding on the rest of the state, but prompted the state legislature into action. A system for the regulated harvest and sale of peyote for members of the NAC was approved, and Amada became one of the first licensed distributors in 1969 (Schaefer 2015; Tunnell 2000).

5. Native American Church sign over the entrance to Amada Cardenas' property in Mirando City, Texas (Photo courtesy of Tuyet Hang).

Amada continued to sell peyote through the 1970s before retiring in the early 1980s. Amada continued to keep her door open, and Native Americans from around the country would come to visit her, and hold peyote ceremonies on her property, until her death in 2005 at the ripe age of 100. It was Amada's wish that her property continue to be a place of sanctuary for members of the NAC, and arrangements were made by her only son, Claudio Cardenas, Jr., to provide a caretaker for the property. Gary Perez, who identifies as Coahuiltecan, and his wife Debbie, were chosen to manage the property and provide hospitality to those seeking to visit the grounds and hold prayer services during their pilgrimage to the Texas peyote gardens (Fig. 5). A fortuitous development, considering that the NAC peyote religion likely draws its roots from the historical Coahuiltecan peyote ceremony.

After nearly a dozen years with only three licensed distributors, 2017 brought the first new distributor to enter the trade since 2002. Despite this recent uptick in distributors, the peyote trade shows significant signs of decline. Annual sales of peyote have dropped from a high of 2.3 million buttons (cactus tops) in 1997 to an average of just above one million over the last few years (Feeney 2017). Annual demand for peyote, however, has been estimated at between 5 and 10 million buttons, and changing conditions, including restricted access to land, overharvesting, and environmental degradation, are making it increasingly difficult for peyoteros to meet demand and earn a living (Anderson 1995; Cobb 2008; Feeney 2017).

Between 2013 and 2015 I spent a total of 10–12 months with current and former peyoteros of South

6. Harvested peyote buttons found for sale in Texas. Each is about 1 inch in diameter.

Texas to learn about the history of the trade, their business practices, and some of the current challenges they face. During this time I learned some of the tricks of the trade, including how peyote should be harvested and stored, how peyote is bought and sold, as well as learning about the relationships between peyoteros and their Native American customers, and some history on local folk uses of peyote.

Best Practices

Since there are significant conservation issues concerning the peyote cactus, it was interesting to learn more about the "best" practices of the peyoteros. Because the peyotero is in the position of "broker," one who buys and sells peyote, they typically purchase the peyote from employees or others who harvest the plant on their own. This means that the distributor's preferred harvesting techniques must either be communicated or taught to the individual pickers. This, however, can pose difficulties. If a picker doesn't adopt "best" practices, the distributor must choose whether to turn them away (potentially leaving their stocks empty), accept the peyote as is, or perhaps offer to pay pickers at a reduced rate.

One of the major concerns of the peyotero is the size of the peyote that is harvested. Customers typically want medium to large peyote buttons (two inches across or greater), and the distributors also recognize the ecological consequences of harvesting small peyote plants. While a mature plant, if harvested correctly, will survive and continue to grow after being cut, small plants will typically die. Problematically, pickers are customarily paid based on the number of buttons they pick, meaning they get paid the same price for buttons one inch across as for buttons three inches across (Fig. 6). This poses two specific problems: First, any small buttons a picker doesn't harvest is lost income; and second, there is incentive to leave behind larger and heavier buttons that are harder to carry and worth less by weight. A bag of 1000 buttons may weigh up to 100 lbs, which can be difficult to carry through the desert heat, and the smaller the buttons the more one can carry.

The size of peyote buttons sold is a constant source of concern and dismay for members of the NAC, many of whom have suggested that peyote be sold by weight or volume rather than number. However, the practice of selling by the bag (volume) was common among some distributors in the 1970s. This practice was discontinued because pickers discovered they could fill their bags more quickly by digging up the whole plant, a practice which surely contributed to peyote's shrinking range in South Texas. There is a balance between weight and number that the peyote market has not been able to solve, and with a declining number of pickers available peyoteros are reluctant to impose more stringent standards on their employees (Feeney 2017).

Another concern of the peyotero is how peyote is cut. Pickers use a number of tools to cut peyote, including machetes, which give a relatively clean cut, and shovels, which may cause irreversible damage to the harvested plant due to its curved edge. The conservationist approach would be to cut the plant horizontally at ground level, and to only cut through the chlorophyllous top of the plant, without cutting into the root. While the peyoteros prefer a flat cut, some encourage their pickers to cut about a half inch below the chlorophyllous top to include a layer of root to help preserve the harvested top. The reason for this is primarily a concern with the shelf-life of harvested buttons.

Many of the Native American customers of the peyoteros prefer to purchase fresh, green peyote over dried peyote. To meet this demand, peyoteros try to maintain a constant supply of fresh peyote for sale. Due to the nature of the market, however, distributors may have a dozen customers one weekend, and perhaps no additional customers for several weeks. Peyote buttons without a protective layer of root may spoil before customers arrive, a potential loss of income for

7. Example of bruising on a harvested peyote button.

peyoteros as well as a loss of a scarce natural resource. According to some peyoteros, the small layer of root helps buttons maintain a robust and healthy appearance for weeks without beginning to dry or show signs of spoiling.

Finally, peyoteros expect their pickers to take care when picking peyote and to deliver healthy looking buttons without signs of bruising (Fig. 7). Many pickers use gunny sacks to collect peyote, and novice pickers may drop or mishandle the heavy bags, resulting in bruising of the peyote. Much as shoppers bypass bruised fruit and veggies at the grocery store, the peyoteros customers also bypass bruised peyote. Peyote that is bruised is also more susceptible to spoiling. To sell bruised peyote, peyoteros may have to discount their prices and accept a financial loss. This poses problems since bruises may not show up until the day after they've been picked, after the peyotero has already paid the picker full price.

Preparation

Peyote is typically sold either fresh or dried. The main concerns with fresh peyote have been described above, but individual distributors tend to have their own methods of drying peyote. Traditionally, peyote would be laid out on boards to dry in the sun, and turned periodically to ensure even drying. Customarily, the peyote buttons were dried whole, tufts and all. However, this process could take days, even in the Texas summer heat. To combat this, some peyoteros would peel an entire button like an apple, and hang the entire strip to air dry. Others described trimming the buttons into a pyramid-like shape to reduce

8. Mauro Morales standing outside his home in Rio Grande City, Texas.

the volume to be dried while maintaining an aesthetic shape. The remaining pieces would also be dried, then ground and sold as a powder. While a number of peyoteros used to sell powder in addition to dry and fresh peyote, no current distributors offer this service. One distributor voiced concern that the DEA might consider powdered peyote to be an illegal preparation, outside the protection of a distributors license.

Mauro Morales (Fig. 8), one of the remaining distributors, recounted that early in his career as a distributor a Native American man gifted him a

9. Before slicing peyote for the dehydrator each button is cored, removing tufts and harder to digest material, and all root material is removed.

10. Mauro Morales using a commercial vegetable slicer to prepare peyote for dehydration.

11. Morales loading the dehydrator.

12. A food dehydrator can fully desiccate sliced peyote within 8 hours, a process that may take days or weeks by sunlight.

13. Bag of dried peyote slices retaining a relatively vibrant and fresh appearance.

14. Sun-dried peyote.

food dehydrator, and encouraged him to dry peyote mechanically. The dehydrators worked quickly, particularly if the peyote buttons were sliced, and Morales found the quality to be superior. When using the dehydrator, the peyote buttons retained their bright green coloring and produced a smell like fresh baked bread, as opposed to sun-dried peyote which would shrivel and turn a dirty dark green color. The process could be completed in 8–10 hours, and didn't depend on the weather; another advantage. While Morales used to pay his pickers to slice each button by hand he eventually adopted a commercial vegetable slicer to produce more uniform slices and save time (Fig. 9–14).

Members of the NAC have individual preferences for their dried peyote. Some like it sliced, others prefer

15. Peyote and star peyote blooming side by side in a peyotero's home garden.

whole dried buttons. This difference in preference occasionally leads to misunderstandings. The peyote market has traditionally sold peyote by the thousand, and customers could count their purchases to ensure they received what they paid for. With dry sliced buttons it is no longer possible to count the number of buttons sold, and some distributors have been accused of selling dried peyote at a thousand slices rather than a thousand buttons. However, no set of one thousand buttons is created equal. Depending on size, a thousand fresh buttons could weigh anywhere between 80 and 100 lbs. While Morales used to count out batches of 1000 buttons to dry, eventually he came up with a standardized weight for dried peyote based on a batch of 1000 peyotes of mixed sizes. This way he is able to produce and provide a consistent product for his customers.

Harvest of Star Peyote in relation to the Peyote Trade

Due to a variety of circumstances, it has been speculated that the star peyote (*Astrophytum asterias* (Zucc.) Lem.) is occasionally mistaken for peyote and harvested by peyote pickers. If true, this would create a precarious circumstance for the star peyote, which is believed to be limited to thousands of individual plants in its growth range, in comparison to the over one million peyote buttons that are harvested and sold each year (Terry *et al*. 2007). Under these circumstances, the star peyote could be wiped out if even a fraction of 1% of harvested peyote turned out to be star peyote. This speculation, however, appears to be misplaced.

Most of the distributors maintain small peyote gardens on their properties, in order to provide NAC members a private space to pray over living peyote plants, and those in Starr County also include star peyote in their gardens (Fig. 15). There is an apparent association, in different sectors of the NAC, between these two cacti. Two Navajo men commented on the star peyote, both ascribing a cosmologically significant status to the cactus, but with significantly different views. One viewed the star cactus as sacred, but not to be ingested or messed with. The other suggested that when peyote supplies are low, powdered star cactus could be added to powdered peyote in order to make it last longer. According to this informant, star cactus is more powerful than peyote. There is nothing currently known about the pharmacological make-up of the star cactus that would support this assertion, however, Mauro Morales, one of the remaining peyote dealers, recounted observing a young man ingest a star cactus. The young man left shortly after consuming the cactus, but some of his associates returned a year or so later and reported that the man had had a "strong" reaction to the cactus. The reaction was described as "overwhelming," but the author was unable to determine whether this anecdotal account was one of an overwhelming psychedelic nature, or one of overwhelming physical illness. One other account, suggested that some Roadmen use the star cactus as their Chief Peyote in peyote ceremonies; the Chief Peyote playing an important ritual role in the ceremony, without being ingested.

Further investigation is required to determine what the exact nature of star peyote's cosmological role is, whether it is widespread or limited to particular Churches and Roadmen, whether there is any tradition of ingestion, or whether accounts the author was privy to were limited examples of experimentation with a recognized sacred cactus. In any case, the association between star cactus and peyote does not

16. Gary Perez provides the Coahuiltecan interpretation of the White Shaman Mural to David Martin Davies of Texas Public Radio.

appear to be an accidental one, nor was the author able to document any instances of confusion among peyote pickers. Among the older pickers, being able to recognize peyote is akin to people recognizing dandelions in other parts of the country. Peyote was everywhere in the 1940s and 1950s, and everyone knew what it was. Today, peyote is not so common, but specific physical features of the star cactus, including lack of a tap root, make it unlikely to be mistaken with peyote.

Folk Uses

One of the other fascinating aspects of my research was discovering some of the old folk remedies involving use of peyote. Unfortunately, with population growth, economic development, and other factors of modernization, doctors, drug stores and over-the-counter medications have come to replace the *curanderos* and folk treatments once common in South Texas, and most have forgotten the folk uses of this once plentiful cactus. The most commonly mentioned use of peyote was for the treatment of arthritis. Typically, peyote was chopped up and soaked in grain alcohol, then applied topically to treat joint pain and inflammation. An older iteration of this remedy, before passage of the Controlled Substances Act in 1970, was to soak peyote and marijuana (*Cannabis sativa* L.) together in grain alcohol for topical application. While this topical use is no longer common, some peyote pickers report that they will rub fresh buttons directly on cuts and bruises sustained while harvesting peyote. The application is no doubt cooling, and peyote is also known to have anti-biotic properties (McCleary *et al.* 1960; Rao 1970). Other reported uses include daily use as a tonic, or as a stimulant. Peyote pickers described using peyote for its stimulating properties while picking, and interestingly, some pickers report that if they eat a small button the peyote will guide them and help them find other patches of the cactus to harvest.

The Future of Peyote in Texas

The future of peyote in Texas is uncertain. Folk uses are falling out of favor, replaced by store bought treatments representative of the modern era. Development and a history of over-harvesting has led to drastic reductions in peyote's natural range, and has impacted the ability of locals to participate in, and make a living off the peyote trade. Population growth and development has led to new opportunities for young people, and irregular agricultural work in the shrinking peyote trade understandably has limited appeal. The recent addition of a fourth distributor suggests that the trade remains viable, but recent regulatory changes eliminating mandatory reporting of peyote sales to the Texas Department of Public Safety, will make monitoring and tracking the vitality of the peyote trade near impossible. The potential collapse of the peyote trade could have severe consequences for the NAC, which relies predominantly on Texas peyote

distributors for supplies of their sacrament. The NAC has been looking into the possibility of importing peyote from Mexico for several decades, but no significant progress has been made on this front. The question of cultivation has also been considered, but many cultural, regulatory, and legal barriers remain to be addressed.

Meanwhile, Coahuiltecans, Mission Indian descendants, and other indigenous Texans are either reviving or re-discovering their own ancient peyote traditions. A half-dozen Coahuiltecan NAC chapters now operate in and around San Antonio. Some have adopted the modern Plains-style ceremony of the NAC, whereas others follow ceremonial patterns modeled after their own traditions as indigenous Texans, incorporating dance and other features that disappeared when the peyote ceremony was adopted by Plains tribes and moved north out of the peyote gardens of South Texas. As more and more indigenous Texans seek to reclaim and revive family and cultural traditions, the peyote culture of Texas will continue to evolve, and investigations into their own histories as indigenous peoples will continue to grow. Already some are asking what the White Shaman Mural means to them, and what it says about their own histories; questions not addressed by Boyd's (2016) otherwise epic work on this subject. Gary Perez, former caretaker of the Cardenas Estate, and Dr. Mario Garza, of the Indigenous Cultures Institute, have brought an indigenous perspective to research on the White Shaman Mural, identifying aspects of Coahuiltecan creation stories and peyote ceremonies in the rock art, as well as identifying features suggesting the rock art may have acted as an early map of Texas (Fig. 16; Perez & Garza 2013). As interest continues to grow, we will continue to discover just how deep peyote's taproot into Texas culture and history extends. Only time will tell if this connection is preserved through care and conservation, or whether it will be uprooted through development and mismanagement.

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