

A DIFFERENT MEDICINE

Postcolonial Healing in the Native
American Church

JOSEPH D. CALABRESE

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Medicine and Spirit

THE DUAL NATURE OF PEYOTE

PEYOTE IS CENTRAL to the Native American Church. It is central as a medicine, as a potent symbol, and as a spiritual entity. In approaching the topic of the Native American Church member's understanding of Peyote, we enter a domain at the intersection of ethnobotany and ethnopharmacology on the one hand, and anthropological studies of personhood on the other. This is because members of the Native American Church describe Peyote both as an herbal medicine and as an omniscient spiritual entity. Peyote is dried, ground, and consumed or applied as a poultice. It is also addressed and interacted with as a wise and benevolent being, usually called "Mother Peyote" or "Father Peyote," that monitors the Peyotist's thoughts and behavior and helps keep the person on the right path.

This double meaning of Peyote is not unusual in world cultures, especially given the findings of anthropological research on ritual symbols. Victor Turner (1967) found that ritual symbols tend to have certain properties in common. These properties include multivocality, in which a single symbol can link together many meanings. For example, Turner wrote about how the *mudyi* tree symbol of the girl's puberty ritual among the Ndembu of Zambia united sensory meanings, such as breast milk, with ideological meanings, such as matriliney and the unity of Ndembu society. Peyote can be seen, in Turner's terms, as a multivocal symbol uniting the ideological meaning of "omniscient spiritual entity" (as well as spiritual transformation and cultural revitalization) with the sensory meaning of "natural, medicinal herb."

One of the more intriguing findings of classic ethnographic research is that personhood is defined differently in different societies and is often not synonymous with the Euro-American category of "human." For example, the wooden "False Face" masks of the Iroquois are related to as social persons and need to be fed regularly (Fogelson 1979). Cheyenne children,

lacking full responsibility for their actions, were considered only “potential persons” (Straus 1977), while Tallensi considered certain crocodiles to be persons (Fortes 1973). In the contemporary capitalist United States, certain entities such as corporations are treated legally as persons, which is as bizarre a cultural formulation of personhood as any of the others. Discussions of the Peyote Spirit should also be placed within the context of the diverse conceptualizations of the person in human cultures.

To get at the insider’s understanding of Peyote, I began each of my ethnographic interviews with Native American Church members by eliciting a definition of Peyote. Their answers to this question form the primary data analyzed in this chapter. In line with my previous findings, I found that my consultants described Peyote in two ways: Peyote was identified as a medicinal herb with God-given properties and as a personality or spirit that is omniscient and that functions in various roles to help the Indian. Many mentioned both aspects in their definitions. Some Native American Church members emphasized one aspect over the other. The college student *Florence stated, “I think of it both ways: as an herb and as a spirit as well. But I think of it more as an herb than as a spirit.” *Gladys answered as follows:

I guess the physical description would be an herb. And as far as what I see Peyote as, it’s a very powerful spirit, a holy being. . . . [I]t’s the opportunity to have the ability to communicate with the creator, to ask him for the spiritual guidance that you need to solve a situation.

These two passages from the interviews with *Gladys and *Florence seem to differ in relative emphasis given to Peyote as a spirit, even though *Gladys and *Florence are mother and daughter. Another interesting finding, to be discussed later, was that some Navajo Peyotists have a more metaphorical understanding of the spirit of Peyote. These people seem to understand the personal ways of addressing Peyote mainly as a sign of respect for the sacred or as something tangible that the Peyotist can relate to. This demonstrates the diversity of metaphysical perspectives tolerated in the religion.

Peyote as Herb

Native American Church members typically define Peyote as an herb, and its use is sometimes described in the context of Navajo herbal medicine.

The Road Man I am calling *Mike simply stated, “I know Peyote as an herb. There are other herbs on this reservation and Peyote is another one of those that you can use.” Slotkin (1975 [1956], 41) suggested that, in the postfrontier period, Peyote addressed two white disorders, tuberculosis and alcoholism, that were not curable by traditional means. However, among the Native American Church members I have interviewed, Peyote is most often seen as a spiritual panacea for many sorts of illnesses, curing primarily through its spiritual rather than pharmacological essence, but particularly useful against alcoholism: “It’s everything. It’s a teacher, a protector, it’s a guidance. It’s everything to us. The Creator . . . put this herb down for us. We look at it as an herb. And the Creator put certain properties within that herb” (Hoskie).

The pre-Peyote Navajo word for “Medicine,” *'azee'*, has come to be used by Navajo Native American Church members to refer to Peyote. This follows a cross-tribal pattern. Thus, as Schultes (1938, 71) reported, the Delaware *biisung*, the Taos *walena*, the Comanche *puakit*, the Omaha *makan*, the Kickapoo *naw-tai-no-nee*, the Shawnee *o-jay-bee-kee*, and (possibly) the Aztec *ichpatl* are reported in the literature as terms formerly meaning “Medicine” but now also specifically meaning “Peyote” in these contexts. This terminology certainly supports Schultes’s view of the medicinal appeal of Peyote.

In discussing “Medicine” in a Native American context, it is important to emphasize the inclusive, spiritual nature of the concept. The Navajo word for Medicine (*'azee'*) can refer not only to herbal medicines but also to ceremonies and ceremonial paraphernalia. For both traditionalist and Peyotist Navajos, Medicine is something that sets right the person’s disturbed state “by means of both spiritual and organic processes—difficult to separate in any case” (Aberle 1991 [1966], 178). My consultant *Edgar explained it as follows:

Just like with any herbs that we use for healing, we call that Medicine. Just like with the mountain tobacco, it’s an herb. That one we look at as tobacco, it works on your system as well. And then there’s these other herbs that we have that we utilize for certain symptoms and we generalize that as Medicine but they have their own names—they all have their spiritual name, they have their ceremonial names, different ways to gather them and use them.

As an herbal preparation, Peyote is sometimes eaten fresh, but it is more often dried, and the dried button chewed, or dried and powdered. In powdered form, it can be eaten dry or water can be added to achieve an oatmeal-

like consistency, which I found was the easiest way to consume Peyote. Alternatively, a Peyote tea can be made. One Peyotist told me, “We either have a liquid form or the one with the powder... I guess whatever is convenient at the time” (*Ruth). Peyotists do not smoke Peyote. This seems to be a common misconception among Euro-Americans (as “Peyote-smoking Indian” is a common racial epithet aimed at Native Americans generally). The taste of Peyote is notoriously bitter and often induces vomiting. This bitterness is given a spiritual meaning by Native American Church members, who say that Peyote is referred to in the following passage from the Bible: “And they shall eat the flesh in that night, roast with fire, and unleavened bread; and with bitter herbs they shall eat it” (Exodus 12:8).

Peyote as Spirit

The characterization of Peyote as a spiritual entity is a cross-tribal pattern within the Native American Church. This spirit may be identified with the Holy Spirit or with Christ but never loses its identity as Peyote. Writing about the Shawnee Peyotists, LaBarre (1989 [1938], 72) stated that some thought of Peyote as the messenger between God and humans and others called it “the interpreter” or “the Holy Ghost.” LaBarre also reports that there is a Mexican folk-Catholic saint called El Santo Nino de Jesus Peyotes, whose attributes are a staff, gourd, feathered hat, and basket, similar to but distinct from El Santo Nino de Atoche, and another attribute is the crescent moon. He is depicted as a little boy and his statue is at the cathedral in Rosales, Mexico (LaBarre 1989 [1938], 35).

Peyote is considered a benevolent guardian spirit or a messenger spirit allowing communication between humans and divinity (Slotkin 1975 [1956], 70; Aberle 1991 [1966], 178). Peyote is present in the ceremony in the form of the “Mother Peyote” or “Father Peyote,” an especially large and perfectly formed cactus that is placed on the central crescent-shaped mound of earth. Prayers are sent through Peyote to the Creator or to Peyote itself, who has powers of its own. As Navajo Peyotist Wilson Aronilth (1981, 1) writes, “This Divine herb... has a mind; it can see, it can move, and it grows.” In response to my query about Peyote as a spiritual being, my consultant *Henry replied, “Yes there is a spirit for me. And I look at that and I respect that spirit.” Hoskie explained it as follows:

This Peyote was put down with certain properties by the Holy Spirit. That’s the mediator between you and the Creator. It’s also

got properties and a spirit of its own. And so we call it “Mother Peyote,” “Father Peyote.” . . . We believe that we tell our problems to this Medicine here, then it’s gonna help us to overcome whatever problems we’re having.

An interesting manifestation of Peyote’s spirit in the ethnographic literature is the existence of stories describing talking or singing cacti. This is a central part of the Peyotist origin myth. It is also said that one may find Peyote, in the desert fields where it grows, by listening for its beautiful singing. It continues to sing inside the bags in which it is stored after harvesting. Lumholtz, working among the Tarahumarah, wrote that one of the Tarahumarah men, who wanted to use his bag as a pillow, could not sleep because he said the plants made so much noise (Lumholtz, cited in LaBarre 1989 [1938], 13). D’Azevedo’s Washoe consultants also reported the singing of Peyote:

Each one of Them little green Herbs is singing His own songs the Creator gave Him. Any Indian Member in good standing can hear Them all singing if he go on a run down there to get the Medicine. (Anonymous Washoe Peyotist in D’Azevedo 1985, 2)

When we get a load of Peyote I go through and pick out some of the biggest ones. They is the oldest. Them’s the ones you can hear singing sometimes where they grow. (Anonymous Washoe Peyotist in D’Azevedo 1985, 9)

As with the inclusive Native American concept of “Medicine,” personification is not limited to Peyote but is also applied to other aspects of ceremonial life. Aberle’s consultant Mike Kiyaani stated, “Fire is a person who doctors. There is a fire in every home, and fire is like a person. We cannot live without it. And the poker, too, is like a person. Peyote is a woman; mother earth is a woman; and water is a woman” (Aberle 1991 [1966], 140). Another of Aberle’s consultants, David Morton, states that the gourd, staff, and sage, which pass together around the meeting, “are like a person who talks to you” (Aberle 1991 [1966], 175). However, Peyote’s personality is unique in its special guiding role in the lives of many Native American Church members. This special relationship is obvious in the following passage from *Gladys:

I guess maybe because my faith is so strong in this Medicine that even today’s challenges I always think back to the Medicine. When I

fall down, I make a mistake, I think back to the Medicine and think, “OK. What are you trying to teach me today?” or “Why did you put this in front of me?”

Omniscience

Omniscience is among the most typical characteristics attributed to the Peyote Spirit. Aberle reported that various terms are used in the ceremony that imply that Peyote is all-seeing, such as “nothing is hidden from it from horizon to horizon” (Aberle 1991 [1966], 377). The omniscience of Peyote is implied by Peyotist ritual experiences, such as dreams or visions, that are interpreted as communications from or through Peyote but which nevertheless refer to the Peyotist’s deepest thoughts, guilt feelings, or memories. Because nothing is hidden from it, ingestion of Peyote reveals the nature of the problem and its resolution to the meeting’s participants. They partake in the omniscience of Peyote. One of my consultants told me that the person for whom the meeting is called is asking the participants, “Think to the four directions for me. Think to Mother Earth for me. Help me.” As a young Peyotist explained it to me, “If you pray to Grandpa Fire in that way, he can give you blessings in that way to have a spiritual vision. If you have faith, he can show you that. The Peyote will see all” (*Adam).

This educational guidance of Peyote extends beyond the ceremony. One of my consultants told me of a problem his young son was having in learning how to tie his shoes. His father gave him a single Peyote button to eat and, with the help of Peyote, he learned how to tie his shoes that day. The omniscient Peyote took the form of an authority figure for *Mike’s grandsons, who were taught the familiar formula “it knows if you are bad or good.” Because nothing is hidden from it, not only does use of Peyote reveal the nature of the problem and its solution to ceremonial participants, but also Peyote’s omniscience functions to keep the Peyotist from committing moral infringements like consuming alcohol. As *Mike’s young grandson *Ben told me, “It knows if you’ve smoked or drunk.” When I asked him “Who?” he replied, “The Father Peyote.”

As stated previously, LaBarre (1989 [1938], 97) suggested that the belief that Peyote “sees and punishes evil deeds” may go all the way back to the Huichol and Tarahumara tribes of Mexico, making it one of the most

important Mexican influences on the Native American Church and thus one of the oldest features of the religion. Radin (1914, 5–6, 19) writes,

If a person eats peyote and does not repent openly, he has a guilty conscience, which leaves him as soon as the public repentance has been made. . . . If a peyote-user relapses into his old way of living, then the peyote causes him great suffering. . . . The disagreeable effects of the peyote varied directly with a man's disbelief in it.

Peyote as Parental

Another typical way of characterizing the Peyote Spirit is as a parental figure. Native American Church members refer to Peyote as “Mother Peyote” or “Father Peyote.” *Gladys simply stated, “The way I look at it, I look at it as both my Mom and Dad.” When I asked *Edgar to explain this way of addressing Peyote, he stated:

That's part of our clanship, the extended families of that clan, like my Mom's clan, if I meet an elder, a lady that's of the same clan, she can address me like her son. It's an opportunity to say that. And when we say Mother Peyote, to me, that's the same thing. You're saying on a spiritual level, you're saying mom and asking for help. And again, it takes it on a personal level where, it's like for us as human beings, the Peyote—Medicine—has its own characteristics.

We see from this passage that some Native American Church members use the parental form of address to invoke the aid of Peyote following the model of reciprocal relationships in traditional matrilineal Navajo clans. Native American Church members also appeal to God using parental forms of address. Aberle reported Navajo Peyotist references to God as “Our Father,” or even “Our Father and Our Mother,” and to the participants as “Your children” or “Your babies” (Aberle 1991 [1966], 153).

The question of the gender of Peyote is a topic that LaBarre addressed in a few places. We learn from LaBarre that the Zacatecas “say they are male and female,” that the Huichol distinguish *Tzinouritehua-hicouri* (“Peyotl of the Gods”) from the stronger and more bitter *Rhaitoumuunitarihua-hicouri* (“Peyotl of the Goddesses”), and that the Huichol have a tutelary goddess for Peyote called *Hatzimouika*, while the Peyote deity of the Tarahumari is

male (LaBarre 1989 [1938], 12–13). The Winnebago are evidently influenced by an older tribal pattern in their use of two sacred Peyotes, one male and the other female (LaBarre 1989 [1938], 72).

I addressed this topic in my interviews with Native American Church members and opinion was divided, with some identifying Peyote as female and some saying that Peyote is both male and female. None said it was exclusively male. *Beatrice said, “Probably both. . . . [W]hen I think about it, I think of both.” *Edgar responded as follows:

Well my understanding is both male and female. Mainly what I was told, and I seen this before when I was under the influence, is that there’s four females that are guarding this Peyote. They are all sisters. That’s one of the stories that I’ve heard. And sometimes when that Medicine and the drumming and singing really gets moving spiritually, and then there’s only about one or two women in there, if you concentrate, sometimes you can hear a whole bunch of ladies singing. And to me, that herb is by itself and then the fireplace and the altar where we pray is both male and female. And the way the herb grows, it has to be male and female as with anything—the same with the fire. They say that only one log cannot work as well as two. So they start with two, then they add more to it—just like a family, the more the family stays together, the fire gets stronger and stronger.

Many things in the Navajo universe are male or female, including ceremonies and even hogans, the traditional Navajo log dwelling. The rural Peyotist family I lived with had three female hogans and a male hogan. The female hogan is the more typical type with the flatter roof. The male hogan is conical like a tipi and is more rarely seen. A Peyotist consultant in another part of the reservation echoed this idea that Peyote is both male and female because everything is male and female:

I think with that, it’s like the concept there’s always a male and a female. . . . So we talk about Grandpa and Grandma Fire too, there’s both. And the same thing with that Medicine. In order for everything to be *k’e*, you always have to have a male and a female. . . . It’s showing respect and there’s a way of communicating too. It depends on where you’re at when you go in that meeting. (*Henry)¹

Other Native American Church members identified Peyote as primarily female, which is not surprising given that the Navajo tribe is matrilineal and given the importance of the female in the Peyote origin story and in Peyotist ritual symbolism. One elderly Road Man, referring to the origin story, answered this way: “Well, at the beginning they say the female is the mother Peyote. That’s the way they called it. Not the male. Female. The reason why is from the beginning, way back, the story” (*Leonard). *Florence attributed her female identification of Peyote to her Navajo culture:

I think of it more in the female sense, probably just because growing up and learning about the Navajo culture and tradition, everything seems to revolve around females—like Changing Woman. And just like from when I was small—learning from just watching my mom—she called it mother. I’ve never heard anybody call it father.

Identifications of Peyote as male are encountered more often in other tribal traditions of Peyotism. For example, Crashing Thunder used the terms “Grandfather,” “Peyote Chief,” and “Father Peyote” (LaBarre 1989 [1938], 72). My consultant *Mary explained that her father calls it “Mother Peyote,” but on her husband’s side of the family, they call it “Chief Peyote.” She stated, “I guess it depends on which traditional teachings you have that pertain to it.” One Menomini Peyotist interviewed by George Spindler (Spindler and Spindler 1984, 98) described a vision of Peyote as a powerful man with a police cap who was pounding the message into him.

More Metaphorical Understandings of Peyote’s Spirit

Some Native American Church members seem to have a more metaphorical understanding of Peyote’s spirit. For example, when I asked *Beatrice about her understanding of Peyote as a spirit, she placed this element of the church’s teachings in the context of more general Native American patterns of personalizing the natural environment:

I think as Navajos and as Native American people, one of the things that we do is we give those properties of entity, spirit, life to trees, rocks, the earth. We say there’s a spiritual side too. We

also do the same with the Medicine . . . and even animals. Like when they say “All my relations” [a ritual phrase often used in the Sweat Lodge] . . . being a part of the earth.

In a similar way, *Henry discussed Peyote as a Medicine and a spirit but used “spirit” in more phenomenological/psychological terms:

It overlaps. I see it as a little of both. I guess Medicine is like physically—you taste it and that’s the Medicine. Spiritually, it’s the spirit of that Medicine. I guess you could say it really has that energy in there. . . . [I]t’s like the spirit of alcohol—remember in Duran’s book he talks about it? There’s always a spirit there. We give it a name: Jack Daniels. And we actually can taste it because that’s addiction. We have post-withdrawal. We actually can taste it, we dream about it, we can actually smell it. And that’s the spirit of it. I guess that’s the negative spirit of it. Same thing with Medicine too. We take the physical part of that Peyote. But the spirit part is another story too. I see as the spirit part like “Yeah, I took this Medicine and it’s gonna make me better.” But we’re not looking at a placebo, we’re looking at the spiritual side.

*Ruth described Peyote as sacramental messenger service. But she placed much less stress on personification:

JC: If somebody were to ask a definition of the Medicine, what would you say?

*RUTH: I think it’s a sacrament—a sacrament that when you take it, that sacrament, if you really truly want to . . . you will be able to get your answers. It’s like a messenger service to the Creator.

JC: Some people say it has a personality of its own. Do you see as male or female spirit?

*RUTH: I really don’t, but I just address it in that fashion when I’m praying about it. And I think it’s something tangible that you are able to relate to. That’s the way I think of it.

Cultural Psychiatry in the Peyote Origin Myth

In the second chapter, I described the theoretical focus of this study in terms of the dialectic of cultural psychiatry (the reciprocal influence of

the cultural and the psychiatric). This focus has roots in the more general focus on the relationship of culture and personal experience (Stigler, Shweder, and Herdt 1990; Obeyesekere 1990; Jahoda 1993). This relationship between culture and personal experience is apparent in the stories Peyotists tell about how they first encountered Peyote. I will refer to this story as the “Peyote Origin Myth.” There are many versions of this story, but most Navajo stories of which I am aware depict a helpless, lost Native American woman separated from her tribe and left to die. The woman hears the voice of Peyote speaking to her and telling her what to do and instructing her to eat the cactus. She then is strengthened and healed of her suffering and is able to reunite with her tribe. The following version of the story is by Wilson Aronilth (1981, 1):

As the story goes, this woman was participating in a hunting trip with fellow hunters from her tribe. . . . A group of warriors attacked these hunters and in the process many were unfortunate and others ran to safety. Among the unfortunate was this one woman. She was wounded from the war party, and was left behind by her people to die. Through all of her suffering she became lost and helpless in the desert. But, out of this desolation and terror this woman heard a voice speak to her first through a dream and after she woke from the dream. The Voice said “Eat the sacred plant that is growing beside you, that is life and all of the richest blessings for you and your Indian people.” Weakly, this woman turned her head against the earth’s surface and saw the herb. Its head was divided into five points. These five points are the symbol of man, his beliefs and his religion. She reached for the plant and it seemed to extend outward to meet her fingers. She pulled out the herb and partook of it. Through the partaking of this plant her strength returned and she was healed and cured from her sufferings.

This story may be interpreted as a symbolic representation of the experience of any Native American person who encounters Peyote and is healed from illness or social alienation. The story’s main character and her tribe were attacked by a group of warriors. My interpretation of this feature of some versions of the story is that it is a symbolic reference to the conquest of Native American societies by Europeans. Next, the main character of the story is portrayed as being alone, wounded, separated from the group, perhaps

abandoned and left to die. This portrayal is a potent symbol of the postconquest situation for many Native Americans: intergenerational trauma, community disruption, and alienation from mainstream Euro-American society, perhaps with the relative deprivation that Aberle wrote about. Next, the voice of Peyote is heard, first through a dream. This seems symbolic of the ritual experiences of Peyotists, which are often not visions but rather auditory experiences of the voice of Peyote warning or reassuring them. When the woman turns to look at the Peyote cactus, she sees “the symbol of man.” This is reminiscent of the self symbolism of the moon altar that is contemplated during the ritual (see chapter VI). Finally, the woman is healed by ingesting Peyote, which is also what happens to many ritual participants. She is subsequently united with her tribe, which is perhaps symbolic of the social integration and supportive relationships that many individuals achieve through involvement with the Native American Church.

This narrative exemplifies the symbolic message “self in transformation” that, as I will argue in the next chapter, dominates the ritual symbolism of the Native American Church. The story has the characteristic structure of a healing narrative: the first half deals with the state of being ill and/or alienated from society and the second half deals with a healing renewal and reconnection to society. The narrative shape of this story is homologous to the death/rebirth symbolism of the Peyote Ceremony: the first half is dark and hopeless and the second is bright and hopeful. This structure is also encountered frequently in self-help groups (Corrigan et al. 2002) and may be a cultural universal of healing narratives. I elicited the following version of this story from a nice old Road Man in the Chinle area:

Some of them got little bit different stories. But the way that I found out and I know, the first tribe that got this Peyote was the Mescalero Apache. They live right below Albuquerque, down south. Mescalero Apache. They say way back what happened was there was this young lady, she got really sick and there's no way to cure it so... they just left her behind. And it was just, nothin' to eat, thirsty, all the sickness. Just about to give up. And I guess she went to sleep. Then she heard someone talkin' to her. Then she feels somethin' on her hand... and heard somethin' talk—a voice. And then all of a sudden she feels somethin' by her hand. It was kind of soft... and they talked somethin'. Sure enough, it was the Medicine, the Peyote. It said [his voice becomes dramatic and raspy]: *“Take me. Take me and eat me. You'll get cured. Take me and eat me and you'll be well. You*

got a tribe and you got relatives over there. You're not going over here. You go back to your tribe." So she done it; went back and reached her tribe. That's how this Medicine helped her. And then it says, "When you get back to your tribe, I want you to talk about me"—the Medicine was talking to her. "I want you to take care of me because you got well by me. This is gonna be the prayer—this is gonna be the way the prayer is gonna go by. That'll be the songs, all the teachings is gonna come about. So when you get there, tell them . . . The man folks—they're the ones who are gonna take care of this." (*Leonard)

This version has a greater emphasis on the pact made between Peyote and the Peyotist, which will be discussed in greater depth in subsequent chapters.

To summarize, not only does the Peyote Origin Myth explain how the Peyote Ceremony came about and give a rationalization, in terms of mythic history, for the use of Peyote, but also the story bears a structural resemblance to the experience of the individual Peyotist. On one level, it is proper to interpret the story as *expressive* of the experience of individuals. However, given our dialectical orientation to the interrelationship of culture and personal experience, it is also proper to interpret the story as aiming to support these very experiences through its narrative structure. Here we can recall Lévi-Strauss's (1963) argument about the Cuna healing song for difficult childbirth: the shaman's song manipulated the patient's body through its narrative shape, a shape that was homologous to the illness condition. This homology not only enabled the patient to meaningfully grasp her situation but also enabled a structural reorganization of physiology "by inducing the patient intensively to live out a myth" (Lévi-Strauss 1963, 201). Following Lévi-Strauss, I propose that the Peyote Origin Myth, properly "lived out" by practicing Native American Church members, also enables Peyotists to mentally grasp their experience of suffering, through identification with the main character, and it helps them emplot themselves in a narrative of transformation and relationship with the Peyote Spirit.

Peyote's Multiple Levels of Significance

This chapter has explored the centrality of Peyote to the Native American Church on many levels. On a more material level, Peyote is a sacred

medicinal herb that is used as a panacea for various problems but that has shown itself especially effective against alcoholism. On a more ideological level, Peyote is understood as an omniscient and benevolent spiritual entity: a personlike presence in the culturally constituted behavioral environment of the Native American Church, to use Hallowell's (1955) terms. Characterizations of the spirit of Peyote by Native American Church members range from identifications with Christ to images of an authoritarian police officer (Spindler and Spindler 1984, 98). But the most typical characterization of Peyote is as a vigilant and protective parental figure ("Mother Peyote" or "Father Peyote"). Some Peyotists seem to have a metaphorical rather than literal understanding of Peyote's spirit, reflecting the pluralistic attitude toward belief in the religion.

These two understandings of Peyote (herb and spirit) come together in the concept of "sacrament," a term that Native American Church members use and which they share with Christians, as well as in the spiritually inclusive Native American concept of "Medicine" (*'azee'* in Navajo). Similarly, cultural meaning and personal experience reflect each other in the Peyote Origin Myth, in which Peyote communicates with and heals a lost Indian woman separated from her tribe.

Some would claim that referring to the Peyote cactus as an entity, as "Mother," for example, is irrational, because a plant has no brain and is thus not capable of conscious thought. But in its application as a feature of a cultural psychiatric system or an approach to socialization, seeing Peyote as an entity is part of a social intervention that is very rational in its goals. Belief in Peyote's spiritual presence may also be seen as a logical interpretation given the sorts of ritual experiences available in the Native American Church, such as actual perceptions of the voice of Peyote or visions of spiritual beings. And, even though it is true that the Peyote cactus does not have a brain, it is full of chemical substances that are structurally similar to neurotransmitter substances in the brain and that have unique psychological effects. These same psychological effects that Peyotists interpret as signs of a spiritual presence have had a much different meaning to the Europeans who invaded North America. To the Spaniards who conquered Mexico, the effects produced by Peyote were evidence that it was the vegetable incarnation of Satan. This view was an ethnocentric assumption based not on actual experience of the effects of Peyote but rather on culturally saturated judgments of the Native Americans who ingested Peyote. The culture clash has persisted and is still based on an inadequate, ethnocentric understanding of Peyote as used by Native Americans.

This chapter has addressed the lingering misunderstanding of Peyote by non-Peyotists, adopting an anthropological perspective based on long-term participant observation and interviews with members of the Native American Church. It is only by adopting such a perspective, grounded in an understanding of the diversity of world cultures rather than in a narrow ethnocentrism, that we can hope to understand and assess a complex cultural reality such as the Native American's understanding of Peyote.