

Sacred Medicine: Use of Psychogenic Peyote within Ho-Chunk Healing

Sersch M.

Corresponding Author:

Michael Sersch

Empify Health System

mjsersch@emplifyhealth.org

Abstract

Current interest in the effectiveness of psychedelic-assisted recovery from trauma and other mental health conditions has been increasing. The Native American Church's (NAC) use of the psychoactive plant peyote for over 100 years within sacred ritual has been a unique approach to religious expression and individual as well as collective healing, especially when addressing cultural trauma as well as individual experiences of PTSD, substance use, depression, and illness. Acceptance of the rite by some Ho-Chunk (Winnebago) at the turn of the 20th century is shown to be a form of both cultural resistance to settler colonial hegemony and a process of personal recovery from trauma.

Keywords: *Survivance, healing, Ho-Chunk, Native American Church, peyote.*

Background

This essay explores the profound role of peyote rituals within the Native American Church (NAC) as practiced by the Ho-Chunk Nation (exonym Winnebago), through reading and contextualising several memoirs by Ho-Chunk NAC practitioners. It situates this spiritual tradition as both a form of cultural resistance to settler colonial oppression and a powerful method of healing from trauma (including PTSD), substance use, and depression. In contextualising religious and spiritual practices towards individual and collective healing amid genocidal actions, it is in conversation with scholar/activist work on Native resistance to settler colonialism by Dunbar-Ortiz (2014), Estes (2019), Whitt (2025), even as these writers do not specifically engage with NAC as a movement.

Wenger (2026) notes that white settler colonialism consistently used “religion” as a defining term that viewed Christianity as one of the civilising aspects of settler colonialism, in contrast to traditional religious practices among Native peoples. In response, Native communities and individuals responded in a variety of ways, which included lawfare, armed resistance, cultural responses, and religious approaches.

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Wenger (2026) notes that white settler colonialism consistently used “religion” as a defining term that viewed Christianity as one of the civilising aspects of settler colonialism, in contrast to traditional religious practices among Native peoples. In response, Native communities and individuals responded in a variety of ways, which included lawfare, armed resistance, cultural responses, and religious approaches. The religious and spiritual categories tended to include continued engagement in traditional religious practices, adoption of Christianity (which was no guarantee of safety, see Wilensky-Lanford, 2025), or novel religious expressions that integrated Christian elements within a Native context. The most famous version of a novel approach was the pan-tribal Ghost Dance, which occurred in neighbouring communities to the Ho-Chunk shortly before the founding of NAC (Estes, 2019). Another (earlier) religious movement, the gathering of an armed inter-tribal community (including some Ho-Chunk) at Prophetown, led to the Black Hawk War (Trask, 2007). Both the Ghost Dance and Black Hawk’s movement were violently repressed. Legal response by the Ho-Chunk was the adoption of settler property philosophy, which prioritised individual over collective ownership. Tribal members who had been forced from Wisconsin homeland returned and purchased small parcels, which provided a legal framework to stay (Kantrowitz, 2023). The NAC was itself quickly subject to legal restrictions, which were successfully fought in court and Congress. Even during legal prohibition, the consequences of NAC involvement were far less severe than the military suppression of armed resistance (Barnett, 2025; Pesantubbee, 2000).

By tracing the historical and contemporary significance of the NAC’s syncretic religious practices through 3 separate Ho-Chunk authors, the essay highlights how some Ho-Chunk have embraced peyote ceremonies to foster individual recovery and community survivance, in a manner that was far safer to the community, even if the NAC ended up facing legal barriers. This indigenous approach to trauma healing contrasts with Western medical models by emphasising collective support, spiritual connection, and cultural continuity. We will explore writings by 3 Ho-Chunk authors connected to the NAC, all whose texts involved co-authorship with a white author, which complicates the questions of authenticity. Only one text, *Mountain Wolf Woman* (Mountain Wolf Woman & Lurie, 1961), centres a female experience, although even the subtitle, “Sister of Crashing Thunder”, places her relation to a brother (who is a somewhat unreliable narrator) in context. Another author, Reuben Snake, has several text, including *Your Humble Serpent* (Snake & Fikes, 1996), which is a memoir by a leader of the second generation of the American Indian Movement as they transition from armed resistance to legal and cultural efforts at resistance. Snake also worked with the well-known religious scholar Houston Smith to document the legal challenges the NAC went through to ensure legal protection (Smith & Snake, 1995). The editors of all these texts (Fikes, 1996; Lurie, 1961; Smith, 1995) outline in their respective forwards the challenges and intentionality they engaged in to respect and preserve the voice and narration of the primary Ho-Chunk authors.

The third set of texts are by Crashing Thunder and his white co-author and editor, the anthropologist Paul Radin, who centres Crashing Thunder (known by many names in the works, including Sam Blowsnake) in a redemption story with the NAC as a catalyst. Per Graeber & Wengrow, (2021) Radin was a well-respected anthropologist whose extensive work on the Ho-Chunk included detailed exploration of multiple aspects of the tribe (Radin, 1923/1990) as well as specific interviews with Ho-Chunk subjects, especially Sam Blowsnake (see below). The text of a memoir that would eventually be labelled *Crashing Thunder* had several incarnations: initially it was a brief biographic sketch of Sam Blowsnake’s brother Jaspar (Radin, 1913). Paul Radin decided to keep the name as he described the life of Sam, whose name is “Big Winnebago” in *Autobiography of a Winnebago Indian* (Radin, 1920). In 1926, the book was greatly expanded as *Crashing Thunder: The Autobiography of a Winnebago Indian* and included some of Jaspar’s as well as Sam’s biographical information (see Burnham, 1998).

Blowsnake had a challenging past, including “murder, stealing, and womanising” (Burnham, 1998, p. 471). Burnham (1998) notes that Blowsnake performed in a wild west show with Sitting Bull. She feels that a sense of performance continues into the document. Although she does not go into details about the NAC in

her essay, she does address a theme of sin and redemption found within Christianity, especially Evangelical faith, which spilled into the narratives of the NAC converts.

“By repeatedly confessing to lying and to misrepresentation, Sam Blowsnake makes it impossible to read Crashing Thunder as the truthful account Radin wanted it to be read as” (p. 482).

She centres the story during the long tradition of confessional memoir, the story of redemption from depravity to salvation, dating at least to St. Augustine and which would have been very familiar to all on the frontier as a part of the religious revival tradition (Wilensky-Lanford, 2025). This is echoed in Calabrese’s (2013) observation that initiates in NAC have a genre of personal storytelling that is ritualised, much like Alcoholics Anonymous or redemption stories within evangelical Christianity.

Gerard Vizenor (1999) labelled it a “reverse striptease” when indigenous persons don tribal outfits to point to an Indianness of the past. As an example, Arndt (2016) builds upon this concept by contrasting two dance performances by Ho-Chunk representatives: the first was a War Dance done at the White House during negotiations during the period of armed resistance; the second, 65 years later, was done at the Columbia World Fair in Chicago, next to faux Chinese theatre and an Orientalised space of exotic dancers. Lonetree (2019) notes that for decades, Ho-Chunk engaged in performance at tourist traps. This would include clothing far more typical of western plains tribes would wear, or even some form of bricolage, in order to appear more recognisable (like the movie and pulp-novel images white tourists were expecting). Ho-Chunk folks would be posing for photographs while also collecting funds to get formal portraiture done, which was then done in their own traditional clothing. Monetising the visual was a common approach, with the selling of baskets and postcards done as well as charging for dance performances (Arndt, 2016; Lonetree, 2019). Before the legalisation of tribal gaming, this was one area of financial support in very lean times. Perhaps the best example of the reverse striptease is Sam Blowsnake, one of the primary sources of information for Paul Radin (and thus, an unreliable narrator). With this said, subsequent memoirs (Fikes & Snake, 1996; Mountain Wolf Woman & Lurie, 1961, Snake & Smith, 1995) appear to be much more straightforward, although reticence about details within Ho-Chunk religious life (both the NAC as well as earlier traditional ways) will be a recurring theme.

Ho-Chunk History

The Ho-Chunk Nation, also known by the exonym Winnebago, are a Native American tribe originally cantered in the area in and around present-day Wisconsin. Oral histories trace their origins near modern-day Green Bay (Thundercloud, 2021), with archaeological and linguistic evidence linking them to the Cahokia empire which arose about a millennia ago, whose frontier would have been in the Ho-Chunk heartland (Pauketat, 2010). The nation retains a strong tradition of deep history in the area, claiming “we have always been here, and more than likely we will always be here” (The Ho-Chunk Nation, 2026, NP). The tribe is currently divided legally between individual and tribal property holdings in Wisconsin and a formal reservation in Nebraska, a division resulting from forced removals and strategic returns to ancestral lands (Kantrowitz, 2023).

Early colonial efforts in the region, from the French, Spanish, and British, were mostly cantered around fur trade and involved very limited settlements (Antoine, 2022; Kantrowitz, 2023). These created a century long Creole community in the older settlements, much like Canada’s Métis people (Murphy, 2000; Murphy, 2014). White’s (1990/2010) notion of “middle ground” (relatively equal communities engaging each other) appears to be occurring in these communities, some of whom instituted a curfew of the white military men due to nighttime drunken behaviour (Murphy, 2014). As French influence waned post French and Indian War (known in Europe as the 7 Years War) the fur trade also declined with loss of beaver furs, which led to

efforts at white settler placement through treaties, forcing native peoples into increasingly smaller locations (Treuer, 2019).

The Ho-Chunk aligned with the British during the War of 1812 but suffered territorial losses following U.S. victory (Antoine, 2022). Illegal settler incursions into treaty lands led to conflicts such as the Winnebago War of 1827, which was suppressed militarily despite justifications of self-defence under Ho-Chunk law, as Ho-Chunk defence of property and persons was deemed to be threatening (Derleth, 1985; Red Bird, 2006). Settler lawfare, characterised by selective application of laws favouring colonists, further marginalised the Ho-Chunk (Farnia, 2025; Fania, in press). These pressures led the Sauk and Ho-Chunk military and spiritual leader Wabokieshiek (White Cloud), who is often referred in earlier literature as Winnebago Prophet, to unite with Black Hawk in an armed opposition to the ongoing settler invasion. Both Black Hawk and White Cloud had dreams that conveyed a belief their efforts would repel those who were seen as invaders. While some Ho-Chunk and neighbouring Sauk as well as Meswaki (Fox) were involved in the Black Hawk War, it was not a united front from any tribe (Trask, 2007). This was, however, an armed and traditionally religious effort at opposing the oncoming settlers, who were moving into the area for lead mining (Kantrowitz, 2023).

Following forced removals beginning in 1848, the Ho-Chunk were relocated multiple times, ultimately settling in Nebraska where the Winnebago Reservation was created and remains to this day (Tronnes, 2017). Many resisted removals through return migrations and land purchases, creatively using settler legal frameworks of the right of property to maintain ties to Wisconsin. This was an interesting legal category, given citizenship for Natives was not granted until many years later, but property ownership (even over an acre of swampland) created an argument for staying that was persuasive with settler values systems (Kantrowitz, 2023). Earlier armed resistance, with the spiritual practices that were similar in traditional Native communities, were unsuccessful and seemed to expedite military removals (Trask, 2007).

While removal to reservations caused devastating consequences to indigenous communities, native cultures continued. Federal response was to then require boarding schools, initially large and regionally located, and then more locally due to the cost burden (Blackhawk, 2023; Carlisle Indian School Digital Resource Centre, 2025). Boarding schools aimed to eradicate indigenous cultures by forcibly assimilating children, including punishing use of indigenous language and culture (Kimmerer, 2013). These schools, often run by Christian denominations, inflicted lasting trauma on Native communities (Duran & Duran, 1995). If we believe Jenkins's (2024) observation that "the settler revolution is a religious revolution" (p. 145) we can see here colonial use of theological agendas tied to genocidal efforts. Ironically, the reservation system (which brought disparate tribes together in small geographic spaces), the boarding school efforts (especially the larger, pan-tribal ones), and the expansion of interstate railroads allowed the spread of NAC and the earlier Ghost Dance (Maroukis, 2010).

Interestingly indigenous religious responses seem to be a form of what Gerard Vizner labelled *survivance* (1999), an effort at both survival and resistance. These *survivance* efforts appear to continue White's (1990/2010) theory of middle ground as well, as NAC and other traditions blended aspects of Christian and tradition practices. For Martin (2001), the loss of language has led to loss of traditional religious practice, which is a void the NAC is able to fill. Not all authors agree that NAC is a form of resistance or survivance. For example, Jay (2019) in writing about a NAC founder (and former Ghost Dancer), Jack Wilson, states: "He presented the tipi ceremony not as a rival to the mission school and prayer meeting but as a complement of them" (p. 72). Barnett (2025) notes that it was Wilson who was intentional in both the anti-alcohol and gambling beliefs, as well as greater openness to Christian influence, in the NAC. A Ho-Chunk NAC evangeliser, John Rave, further brought in Christian approaches by using a baptism and the Christian Bible into the ceremony (Stewart, 1987; see also Radin, 1923). Mountain Wolf Woman shared some of Rave's experience, stating,

“The two men went into the man’s house in an upstairs room, drew the shades and ate peyote. Although they were indoors, John Rave could see the out-of-doors and the morning star. It was like the story of Abraham and the stars of the Bible” (quoted in Steward, 1987 p. 151).

Rave’s influence was strong, however by the end of his life he likely experienced some age-related dementia and was involuntarily committed to an asylum, which Steward (1987) noted was used by governmental figures as proof of the negative impacts of peyote.

Native American Church

Religious traditions among the Ho-Chunk include the traditional Medicine Dance (Jones et al., 2011). Early trading did involve some degree of missionary work, although the impact of the French, the brief Spanish involvement, and subsequent British role were a relatively light touch. Missionary efforts of Christianity were much stronger under US control, including in boarding schools run by denominations and later local control (Olson, 1975). Syncretic efforts of survivance, including Prophetstown in Illinois, created in 1832 as an apocalyptic armed response with religious themes, involving Ho-Chunk and neighbouring tribes and was a centre of the Black Hawk War (The Lincoln Log, 1832/2025; Trask, 2007). (This Prophetstown is not to be confused with a similar Prophetstown east of the area in Indiana, created in 1805 and suppressed in 1811 by future US president William Henry Harrison, see Rowe, 2023). Similarly, the Ghost Dance became popular in tribes to the West of the Ho-Chunk, which foretold the end of white settler colonialism in a post-millennial vision (which did not have much appeal for the Ho-Chunk), was met with violent suppression and had founders who gravitated to the NAC (DuVal, 2024; Gwynne, 2010).

While religious practice is common within the Ho-Chunk, anthropologist Paul Radin noted that there was great allowance for acceptance, rejection, or synthesis of various spiritual practices (Graeber & Wengrow, 2021; Radin, 1927). The Medicine Dance remains a sacred and secretive practice, while the NAC has become a prominent form of spiritual expression and healing. In response to cultural suppression in the boarding school era, pan-tribal religious movements emerged. Some were overt attempts to form a religious resistance to settler colonialism, including the Dream Dance which was popular among tribes to the North and West of Ho-Chunk and which helped lead to the Pow-Wow traditions of pan-tribal celebration (Arndt, 2016; Louttit & Keillor, 2009) and the Ghost Dance, which spread from the South and was violently suppressed among the Dakota, Lakota, and Nakota (DuVal, 2024). These traditions, and later the NAC, offered spiritual renewal and resistance.

The NAC, established officially in 1918, integrates peyote use with Christian elements, providing a path for sobriety and healing (Jay, 2019; Pollan, 2021). Leadership of meetings are done with a Roadman, and other roles are clearly delineated, down to the way participants sit through the all-night service (Pollan, 2021). James Mooney, an US ethnologists employed by the Smithsonian, testified to Congress on the NAC:

“It is not a Christian religion, but it is a very close approximation... the Indian has interwoven with the peyote religion the salient things of Christianity” (quoted in Jay, 2019, p 123).

Mountain Wolf Woman remained active in both traditional, NAC, and Christian practice (Mountain Wolf Woman & Lurie, 1961) whereas Blowsnake, writing 35 years earlier, tends to have more tension between NAC, traditional practices, and Christianity (Radin, 1920; Radin 1923/1990; Radin, 1926). The NAC blends traditional Ho-Chunk teachings with Christian elements, emphasising compassion, respect, and communal support (Snake & Fikes, 1996). Snake, in offering an integration approach (contra Blowsnake) stated:

“All of the old Winnebago teachings about how to interact properly as human beings are taught in the Medicine Lodge. In the Native American Church, we are taught how to have compassion, how to have respect, how to treat each other with respect, how to treat each other with honor, how to share with one another. These are all traditional Winnebago teachings. They were in place long before the coming of Christianity. They are ideas shared by both traditional Winnebago’s and Christians ...But within the Native American Church we pray to God in Jesus’ name and we emphasize the life of Christ as a model. That is something they don’t do in the Medicine Lodge. So in that respect it is totally different.” (Snake & Fikes, 1995, p. 210)

This syncretism reflects adaptive strategies for cultural survival and healing. The NAC, especially earlier forms, prohibited engagement with earlier Medicine Dance traditions (Radin, 1913; 1920; 1923/1990; 1926), although this prohibition loosened with time, allowing membership that is fluid between Medicine Dance, Christian practice, and the NAC (Snake & Fikes, 1996). For example, Emma Olson, writing in the 1970s about her decades teaching at a mission school for the Ho-Chunk, notes the following about the NAC:

The Indians have meetings in big tents having twelve poles representing the twelve apostles. The meeting begins at sunset and lasts until daylight. Many belong to this religion and also to the Christian religion. Some belong to both or none (Olson, 1975, p. 36).

Peyote, a mescaline-containing cactus, is regarded as both medicine and sacrament within the NAC. Its ritual use fosters community support and individual transformation (Jay, 2019). The NAC’s healing practices address physical, psychological, and sociopolitical dimensions of trauma (Pollan, 2021). Peyote has a long history of use among indigenous peoples in the Southwest U.S. and Mexico (Jay, 2019), although use in northern areas such as Wisconsin appear to be unknown before the rise of the NAC. Its psychoactive effects include sensory enhancement and emotional release, lasting approximately eight hours (Bender, 2022; Pollan, 2021). Contemporary research supports its potential to reduce depression, anxiety, and substance use (Agin-Liebes et al., 2021).

NAC membership is hard to determine, with many in certain Ho-Chunk communities joining early after introduction in the early 20th century (Milwaukee Public Museum, 2022). This timeframe also saw the NAC double in size (Jay 2019). Encyclopedia.com (2018) lists 250,000 members nationwide in 2004, with the largest concentration among the Diné (exonym Navajo, see Martin, 2001). This is a remarkable achievement due to the legal barriers, with the use of peyote being outlawed in multiple states and then nationwide by 1970 and international ban through the UN in 1971 (Jay, 2019). NAC does not have specific membership role, so participation is only by guessing. Bender (2022) quotes Jeeshan Chowdhury, founder of *Journey Collab*, a psychedelic research company, as estimating number in the hundreds of thousands, and Pollan (2021) states it could be up to a half a million participants. Reasons NAC participants may be gathering vary and are not pre-scheduled: sickness, addiction, marriage trouble, military deployment, and graduation are all reasons to have a peyote meeting (Pollan, 2021).

The NAC’s use of peyote is a culturally informed approach to trauma healing, contrasting with Western medical models (Dean, 2025; Duran & Duran, 1995). The ritual context, community involvement, and spiritual framework contribute to its efficacy. The Ho-Chunk embraced the NAC in the early 20th century, with many members reporting cessation of alcohol and tobacco use (e.g. Roddy, 1912). Leaders like Reuben Snake have advocated legal protections and cultural preservation through NAC practices (Snake & Fikes, 1996).

History of Repression

The NAC suffered legal repression not only as a part of the suppression of Native identity, but also due to laws outlawing alcohol use in the US under Prohibition. Even with the repeal of alcohol laws, limitations on peyote use continued. In a case involving a Native man who worked as a drug counsellor integrating NAC rituals, including peyote use, the US Supreme Court (Employment, 1990) upheld a state's right to terminate for a failed drug test (which showed peyote). In an opinion authored by Supreme Court Justice Scalia, who conservatives claim to be a supporter of religious liberty, described religious pluralism as a "luxury" and that allowing exceptions to every state law or regulation affecting religion "would open the prospect of constitutionally required exemptions from civic obligations of almost every conceivable kind" (quoted in Pollan, 2021, p. 198). Scalia cited as examples compulsory military service, payment of taxes, vaccination requirements, and child-neglect laws. This decision was seen as outrageous and Reuben Snake would work to get Congress to ensure legal rights, both in 1993 with Religious Freedom Restoration Act and in 1994 the American Indian Religious Freedom Act Amendment (Snake and Fikes, 1996).

In a memoir of her time teaching at a local Ho-Chunk school, Emma Olson (1975) offers conflicting opinions of peyote, at times turning in those who were sending peyote in the mail, and other times taking it herself for a variety of ailments such as a headache. She writes:

"Many were the mornings when I would go through all the pupils' coats, pockets and jackets before and after they were seated at nine o'clock and take the bud or peyote out...In these buds, there's one of the most powerful and peculiar stimulants to the imagination. It's a mysterious drug. One sees brilliant colors and hears music of heavenly harmony...the parents urge their children to eat the bud... Finally I inquired at the post office and then I knew. I reported her and others. It is against the law to send poison through the mail. That put a stop to it. (p. 36-37).

Olson's opposition did not appear to be consistent through her time, based on her memoir. She later writes: "Then there were times that I would have headaches so the mothers would bring peyote or some kind of herb for me to take" (p. 59).

Opposition to the NAC did not only come from external authorities. The Dakota (Sioux) scholar and activist Zitkala-Ša, also known as Gertude Simmons Bonnin, was active in the Society of American Indians. That entity thought NAC was a barrier to the process of citizenship of Native persons and thus advocated for peyote prohibitions, with Zitkala-Ša offering congressional testimony (Bartlett, 2025). Some traditionalists, as well as Native Christians, also voiced opposition (Maroukis, 2010; Steward, 1987).

Trauma Treatments

Use of psychedelics for trauma care is well documented and are often thought to be related to a change in how the individual is perceiving previous, current, and future threats (Londoño, 2024; Nardou et al., 2023; Pollan, 2021; Pollan, 2022). Mental health conditions are characterised by rigid and repetitive thinking, for example PTSD is the perception of threat in the absence of current danger, albeit with a history of trauma (APA, 2022). Addictive use of substances like alcohol are also characterised by repeated cravings and use of harmful substances. Psychedelics appear to override these thinking patterns (Thompson & Thomacos, 2025). Contraindications include worsening the risk of psychosis and potential exploitation of an individual while under the influence (e.g. Londoño, 2024). While no memoirs of Ho-Chunk authors connected to the NAC reference psychosis (Mountain Wolf Woman & Lurie, 1961; Radin, 1913, 1920; 1926; Snake & Fikes, 1996), the collective experience of the NAC ceremony provides protection of exploitation in a way individualised psychedelic assisted psychotherapy does not. As Londoño (2024) notes (and as reported by New York Magazine's *Cover Story*, 2021), risks of financial and sexual exploitation within psychedelic

treatment are very real. This includes underground participants who may have concerns of reporting abusive behaviour due to the illicit nature of the substances, as well as among formal and licit psychedelic clinical trials, including ones organised by large formal entities like Multidisciplinary Association of Psychedelic Science, aka MAPS (MAPS,2022). These actions end up being re-traumatising for already suffering people.

Michael Pollan defined trauma as “the sense of helplessness we feel when we’re assailed by unpredictable forces beyond our control.” (2021, 230). All trauma treatments seek to find ways in rediscovering agency. The genocidal impact of the colonial settler project within the US meant agency, and resistance, was inherently fraught with danger (Scott, 1985). It then becomes incumbent upon communities to develop survivance strategies that protect, heal, and have some degree of hiddenness as well as individual and collective agency (Vizenor, 1999). Overt religious expressions, like a resistance community found in Prophetstown or public displays like Ghost Dance, were simply too dangerous, making an evening NAC ceremony held at home or within the confines of sacred traditional structure much safer (DuVal, 2024). While Paul Radin’s work with the Ho-Chunk NAC leader Sam Blowsnake (1921) is a highly edited and somewhat fictionalised memoir, it does quote the effects of the ceremony, as Blowsnake notes:

“The sick would always get well when a meeting was held in their home and that is why we used to hold them there” (p. 200).

Current clinical approaches, such as psychotherapy, would seek to measure success in a trauma treatment by standards such as reduced subjective units of distress (SUDS) and lower scores of standardised measures (e.g. Agin-Liebes et al., 2021). Healing in a native context carries very different meanings and tends to avoid easily identified criteria (Calabrese, 2013), although the often-reported ability to abstain from alcohol and gambling after engagement in the peyote ceremony does point to tangible effects. What is done in diagnosing in a psychotherapist office usually involves meeting criteria found in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of the American Psychiatric Association (aka DSM, see APA, 2022) and arranging insurance billing. NAC approaches differ here as well. In one interview Pollan (2021) has with Sandor Iron Rope, a Teton Lakota man and president of the NAC of South Dakota:

“So, when you start to think about something, maybe something that needs healing, what you’re thinking about, what you’re saying, the medicine can hear you. It’s not like taking out the DSM and getting a diagnosis” (p. 209)

With that said, Calabrese (2013) notes that billing through Indian Health Service for peyote interventions is allowed. Another difference is the definition of medicine, which in Native communities has a much more significant and expansive meaning. In writing about peyote as a sacred medicine and religious sacrament, Jay (2019) notes:

“It was medicine in the expansive indigenous sense of the word: a power that resides not simply in a drug but in the ritual and the occasion, the support and witness of the whole community, with the will of the patient as important as the will of the doctor” (p. 255).

This sense of “set and setting” (to borrow from the psychedelic approach of the Harvard psychologist Timothy Leary) differs from the Western belief that the manner in which medicine is offered is not as relevant, even if other evidence suggests that patients improve with a sense of understanding the “ritual” of the medicine (white lab coat or the mental health provider having a diploma on the wall, see Torrey, 1986).

In a work on the origins of Christianity, which also began amidst imperial settler colonial efforts involving religious oppression, J.D. Crossan (1998) builds on Scott’s (1985) argument that overt resistance is often too costly for the oppressed, who survive by creative, covert, and collective resistance. He cites Kleinman (1980, 1988), who differentiates disease (organ malfunction), illness (psychosocial experience), and sickness (population-wide experience including political oppression). For Crossan, religious healing can

occur in one, two, or all three domains. Healing is also then reinforcing or undermining the status quo. Snake notes: “Most Indian belief systems suggest that when one gets ill it’s because one is not in harmony with the Creator and Creation.” (Snake & Fikes, 1996, p 231).

Allopathic or Western styles of healing, with an emphasis on the disease (organ malfunction), and a treatment that is dyadic (therapist and patient), effectively ignores the impact illness (psychosocial) and sickness (community wide, involving present, past, and future generations) has upon the individual suffering. It is here that NAC approach to healing is most profound, given the tri-partied elements the collective ceremony has. Pollan (2021) notes the NAC revitalises traditional culture, promotes sobriety, heals body and mind, and creates tribal bonds. Calabrese (2013) did think peyote allowed greater mental plasticity, so new learning can take place. Pollan (2021) notes this is like other psychedelic assisted therapy, however, by including a group experience that differs from the individual but has similarities to the AA experience of the “stories of transformation and rebirth are crafted and then cemented by the approbation of the community” (p. 213).

Substance Use

Calabrese (2013) emphasises the NAC’s role in Native revitalisation, with inner and community focus and strong alcohol prohibition. Alcohol use was rampant in Native communities despite fermentation being unknown pre-colonial contact (Dunbar-Ortiz, 2014). The trope of the “drunken Indian” was used in colonisation, though alcohol was often self-treatment for trauma (Earle, 2014, as cited in Slingerland, 2021).

Duran & Duran (1995) note the documented success the NAC has made in treating addictions within Native peoples, which they attribute to the peyote ceremony to be meaning making in a way that Western addiction treatment and medication to not be. In testimony to Congress in 1918, the Omaha NAC member Francis La Fleshe, the substance recovery effects are noted; “[B]ut one disease it has cured the disease of drunkenness...Practically all of those of my people who have adopted the peyote religion do not drink” (quoted in Martin, 2001, pp. 112-113). Radin (1921) quotes Sam Blowsnake that the NAC ritual was helpful for multiple manner of illnesses: “Yet those that partake, stop their drinking. Sick people also get well. (p. 171). Duran & Duran (1995) note how the NAC, in creating a religious form of individual recovery and collective resistance, echoes earlier attempts to fight settles hegemony such as at the two Prophetstown.

While NAC’s use of peyote was widely reported to decrease use of alcohol, multiple critics pointed to the fact that the process itself involved ingesting a mood-altering chemical. Francis La Flesche’s testimony to Congress in 1918 is one example of offering a counternarrative: “From all I had heard of the intoxicating effects of peyote I expected to see the people get gloriously drunk and behave as drunken people do” (Martin, 2001, p. 112). Intoxication was not what La Flesche saw. “This meeting...was as orderly as any religious meeting I have seen in this and other cities” (Martin, 2001, p.112). Thomson & Thomacos (2025) note that the literature of psychedelic treatment, rarely has the use of the active substance led to problematic use after treatment, in either formal clinic settings or in ritualised settings like NAC.

Secrecy and the NAC

The sacred nature of peyote rituals has led to increased reticence about sharing details outside indigenous communities. Pollan quotes Stevan Benally, a Diné roadman:

“If I divulge too much information about how peyote is good for this particular thing, about how it works, and give some testimonial of how this peyote heals, you might write something that creates curiosity about it among these psychedelic people...To show and tell the world how it works and what it is good for is something I’m kind of scared to do.... If there is money to be made from peyote, nothing will stand in the way” (Pollan p. 200-201).

Concerns about cultural appropriation and overharvesting of peyote plants underscore the need for respectful engagement and legal protections (Jay, 2019; Pollan, 2021). Pollan (2021) wrote, “I was beginning to see that, for someone like me, the act of not ingesting peyote may be the more important one” (p. 208).

Jay (2019) notes that tribes in the natural growing habitat of peyote have been able to use interest in peyote and San Pedro in generating revenue. Current availability of peyote has been threatened by overharvesting in the US and Mexico. Scholarly and popular interest in psychedelics presents a challenge to availability of the sacred plant and reinforces hesitation to share sacred knowledge to the wider, consumer settler colonial culture.

Pollan interviewed several white, graying hippies who have culturally appropriate NAC rituals. One would gather folks to sing show tunes. Another, given the pseudonym Aurora in the text, lived in a “back to the land” commune, attempted to be “authentic” in use of the NAC ceremony.

“What we are doing is not ok. We had taken their ritual and turned it into something else. But this belongs to them. We’re never doing this again.” (Pollan, 2021 p. 182).

Conclusion

The Ho-Chunk Nation’s adoption of the Native American Church’s peyote rituals represents a resilient response to settler colonialism and cultural trauma. After a period of armed resistance, the adoption of other strategies, including legal efforts and spiritual healing, allow the Ho-Chunk to continue asserting their sovereignty and promote community well-being. The NAC’s integration of peyote as sacred medicine offers a powerful model for trauma recovery rooted in indigenous knowledge and practice.

Author’s Note:

The author, who is a descendant of the white settler colonists, lives on Ho-Chunk land in the community of *Hinyukwas*, (aka La Crosse, WI), working as both a mental health and substance use clinician, a clinical supervisor of certified peer support specialists working within the Ho-Chunk heartland, and as an adjunct instructor for an institution with a large Ho-Chunk student body.

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