

MESCAL BEAN: *SOPHORA SECUNDIFLORA*



The Plant

The term "mescal" is also applied to peyote, *Lophophora williamsii*, as well as to the distilled liquor of fermented Agave. Some of the confusion between mescal beans and peyote ("mescal buttons") may stem from the use of mescal beans as a shamanic and ritual intoxicant by the Plains Indians, a practice that predates the appearance of peyote in those parts. Also, the natural ranges of *Lophophora* and *Sophora* are nearly congruent, with the range of *Sophora* somewhat larger and extending farther north. *Sophora secundiflora*, with its strikingly beautiful and spectacular pendants of lilac blossoms, is an indicator plant for peyote. Peyote plants are often found beneath the mescal trees, the partial shade of the shrub providing some extra hospitality for the cactus.

Caches of mescal beans at least 10,000 years old have been found in caves in the Rio Grande and Pecos area, indicative of ancient shamanic use. At one site, a large rock shelter called the Fate Bell Shelter, *Sophora* has been found at every level, spanning an 8,000 year period from 7,000 BCE to 1,000 CE. (Peyote has also been found in the trans-Pecos caves, in association with *Sophora secundiflora*, but only in the upper layers, dated circa 1000 CE. Much older peyote has been found in northern Mexico.)

The beans are toxic, containing cytisine and other quinolizidine alkaloids similar in action to nicotine. Through acetylcholine receptors, cytisine can produce nausea, convulsions, a numbing of the limbs, hallucinations, unconsciousness, and death through respiratory failure. Cattle and sheep can be poisoned by eating the leaves, which also contain cytisine. Alice Marriott (1971) states that even the fragrance of the blossoms is toxic, and can overcome a driver who has been foolish enough to transport a bouquet of the flowers in an automobile. Others state that a single bean can be fatal if eaten by a child. However, according to the *AMA Handbook of Poisonous and Injurious Plants*, serious intoxications are rare, and most poison centers list mescal beans as only mildly toxic. *Sophora secundiflora* is sometimes called "mountain laurel," though that name more properly refers to the genus *Kalmia*, an entirely different plant in a different family.

The hard red beans, which can dry to be partially or wholly black, are also confused with the very similar-looking beans of *Erythrina*, some species of which contain alkaloids with curare-like effects. *Erythrina americana* is reported to contain cytisine, as well as indole alkaloids (Rätsch, 1992). Rätsch reports that the beans were used for divination, as a drug for producing dreams, and as an aphrodisiac. Cytisine is also found in broom, *Genista* spp., and possibly *Cytisus scoparius*. The presence of cytisine in many lupines (*Lupinus* spp.) may explain the shamanic use of



lupine by certain tribes in California and in Alaska. Cytisine is also found in the golden chain tree, *Laburnum anagyroides*.

Information on the shamanic and visionary use of *Sophora secundiflora* is hard to come by. Some reports state that one-half of a crushed, powdered seed was a dose. Sometimes a drink was made by boiling the beans, then taken as an emetic as part of the first-fruits ceremony.

In Mexico the beans are called *frijolillos*, and their use by Mexican Indians in the eighteenth century was enough of a concern to the Catholic priests that use of the beans was asked as part of confession.

BEANS,
J.B. CLARK

*Have you eaten of the frijolillos?
Did you become intoxicated?*

Hast thou eaten of the tree, whereof I commanded thee that thou shouldest not eat?

Coahuila shamans use the mescal beans as an intoxicant at communal dances, suggesting possible aphrodisiacal properties, as well as for visionary purposes. The Tarahumara added crushed mescal root to a fermented maguey drink.

North of Mexico, the bean was used for vision quests on the Plains, for seeking power from animals. Among the Caddo, the Pawnee, and the Wichita, the beans were used for hunting power and for war. Many Plains tribes had mescal-bean cults in historical times, including the Apache, Comanche, Delaware, Iowa, Kansa, Omaha, Oto, Osage, Pawnee, Ponca, Tonkawa, and Wichita tribes. These Red Bean Societies used the bean to gain visions, power, and the songs necessary to become medicine men.

Sophora seeds have been used by tribes as far south as the Tarahumara, and as far north as the Cheyenne, to prepare an eyewash, and for earaches. Wichita runners would eat mescal bean before races, much as the Tarahumara, for the same purpose, chew a little peyote.

Class Mescal bean is not really a hallucinogen, and belongs with tobacco in *thanatopathia*, or with the deliriant in *daimonica*.

The Ally A poet I know, Philip Daughtry, once swallowed a mescal bean, on the middle fork of the Yuba River. He swallowed the bean whole. Or maybe he chewed it just a little. After awhile he began to get uncomfortable. He started feeling bad. His legs began to cramp and his stomach felt distended.

I felt like I'd eaten a pound of sand.

Cold fluids began leaking out of his intestines. He thought that he was hemorrhaging inside, that his blood had turned icy and that blood was leaking out of his rectum. It got scary. His leg muscles wouldn't work. Then it stopped. And he melted into the river. And the Riverman came into him.

Ummmm, me Riverman now.



*Pretty good. Riverman now.
 Been Riverman a long time.
 OK now. OK now.
 Been a long time now. Long time now.
 Ummmmm. OK. Riverman now.
 Riverman knows. Riverman knows.*

Everything became fluid. Sensuous. He became the river. His tactile senses were so heightened that he took his clothes off. The Riverman took over.

It wasn't like acid or peyote. There was no distortion. There was no rational intellect. No complication. Very physical, very sensuous. I could move over the rocks completely silently and fluid. And through the grass and the brush. It was like I was an animal, very mammalian. I could be quiet and invisible. I didn't care at all that I didn't have any clothes on. I was the Riverman.

The Riverman. Slithering over the boulders. Moving upstream, talking Riverman, a new voice, Riverman poems, Riverman phrases repeated over and over. No way out.

And of course there were people all up and down the river—picnickers, fishermen, skinny-dippers. Coming up to them and talking that Riverman talk, the Riverman rhythms. . . . Some of the people walked away. Some of them ran.

I came over a boulder and there were these three naked girls. Usually you kind of give them some berth and just walk on, river ethics. But Riverman walked right up and sat down in the middle of them all naked and talking this outrageous talk.

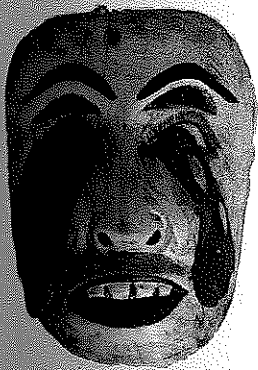
*Hmmmm, Riverman here now.
 Ummmm, elephant pussy here.
 Ummmm, Riverman say OK.*

*Elephant pussy. Pretty good.
 Riverman, he old, but he OK.
 What you say? Riverman know.*

Just talking like that over and over. But somehow it enchanted them and they weren't scared. I just kept walking like that. I broke off a willow sapling and stripped off all the leaves except for the ones at the very end. Then I'd dip the end in the river and I could flick drops of water anywhere on my body that I wanted to. It was like my tail. I kept it all day.

Philip had left his buddies way downstream. They were scared anyway. They thought he'd gone crazy. They didn't know what to do. Philip thought he'd gone crazy too.

But I liked the Riverman. And I liked the way I felt. My libido was stronger than it had been in years. My body felt so good. I liked the way I could move. I could be silent. I could flow. I got kind of tired of the Riverman talk. He had a very limited vocabulary, just kept repeating the same stuff over and over. But I liked the Riverman ok.



It was so sensual. Ecstatic, but steady. I got a hell of a sunburn. I had no appetite and no thirst. The river was like it was alive, like it was an animal, this beautiful silvery animal that was responsive to me. It was an ally, a friend.

My buddies were afraid to take me home to Susan. Like, "here's your husband back, he's crazy now." I tried to stay away from her. Some of it she thought was funny.

It lasted for two full days. I didn't sleep at all. I couldn't stand being indoors, or in bed. The blankets felt rough, too rough to be on my skin.

I remember Philip from the Riverman time—there was something charming about the Riverman, and something wise and ancient—a Paleolithic clown spirit. It could get a little repetitive, though.

I was scared but I liked it, I liked the Riverman. But I was scared that I was permanently changed. My friends were getting pretty scared. But still I liked the way I felt. I was sad when the Riverman left, when I looked in the mirror and saw Philip. And man, did he look bad. He looked pretty bad after those two days, Philip did.

That was fifteen years ago, but I can still call up the Riverman every once in a while. He can still make me laugh and make me feel good.



SOPHORA SECUNDIFLORA, J. B. CLARK

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