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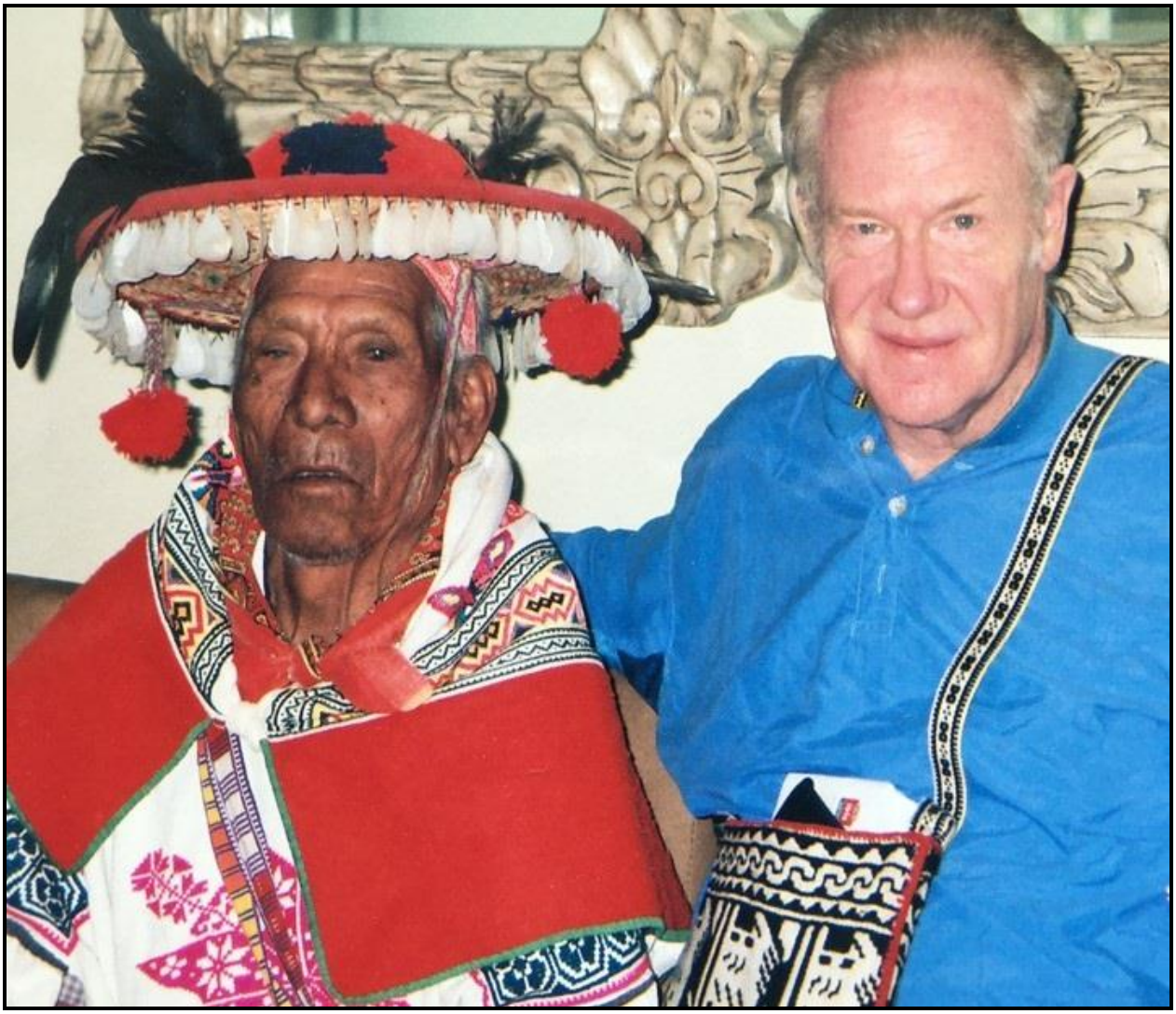

Keynote Article

Carlos Castaneda (1925-1998): Reading Between His Lines, a Summary Judgment

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Abstract

Don Juan is a fictional character. Yaqui in Sonora and Arizona have no history of peyote rituals. These two facts help explain why, by 1975, Castaneda's followers were seeking shamans comparable to Don Juan among the Huichol of Mexico. In recent years peyote tourists have invaded the sacred land where Huichol venerate the peyote spirit. The rising tide of tourists in that area is rapidly depleting peyote and has stimulated Mexican authorities to incarcerate Huichol peyote hunters (Fikes, 1993; 2013). In the early 1990s Castaneda created a cult, Tensegrity, which taught disciples stylized movements combining "tai chi, modern dance and karate" (Marshall, 2007). He established an inner circle, demanding that his followers sever all family ties or "erase personal history." He seduced women followers and probably induced several of them to commit suicide (Austin, 2007; Marshall, 2007). Castaneda's erratic "acting out" and his insistence that followers cut themselves off entirely from everyone essential to perpetuating their identity exemplified harmful practices described by his followers.

Keywords: Carlos Castaneda, Huichol, Yaqui, Peyote rituals, Datura, Psilocybe mexicana

Prologue

In 1968, with publication of his first book, *The Teachings of Don Juan,* Carlos Castaneda gained instant fame. The book, he proclaimed, described accurately his apprenticeship to a Yaqui sorcerer. By the time he obtained his doctorate in anthropology in 1973, after publishing his third book, he was the world's most prominent anthropologist**.** His twelve books, now available in seventeen languages, have sold more than ten million copies. When he died in 1998, he had become "the 20th century's most successful literary trickster" (Marshall, 2007).

1. Climbing to Celebrity Status

Carlos Arana Castaneda was born to unmarried parents in Cajamarca, Peru, on December 25**,** 1925. He entered the USA via San Francisco in 1951 but moved to Los Angeles in 1955. Castaneda worked part-time while taking creative writing and psychology courses at Los Angeles City College, where he graduated with an Associate of Arts degree in psychology in 1959 ("Prelude to Don Juan," 2013). By fall of 1959 he had entered the anthropology department at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA). Castaneda's third book, *Journey to Ixtlan*, was approved as his UCLA doctoral dissertation in anthropology in 1973, after he changed its title and added a 500-word dissertation abstract (DeMille, 1978; Fikes, 1993).

From 1968 to 1976 Castaneda was America's most celebrated anthropologist. His reputation as an anthropologist was steadily eroded as scholarly critiques exposed fraudulent elements in his alleged ethnographic research (DeMille, 1978; 1980). Despite Richard DeMille's insight, confirmed by this author (Fikes, 1993), that Castaneda's alleged apprenticeship to a Yaqui sorcerer, Don Juan Matus, was a "transparent fraud," an international New Age audience still reveres him. Among members of that anti-rational audience, his writing still inspires peyote-promoting tour guides and tourists (Fikes, 2013).

2. Carlos Castaneda and Don Juan

Most anthropologists assumed that Castaneda's first three (or four) books were ethnographically factual. The most compelling evidence of fraud in Castaneda's books is textual inconsistency, especially two mutually incompatible assertions made by Castaneda or his fictional (composite) mentor, Don Juan Matus, whom Castaneda called a "Yaqui Indian sorcerer." One glaring textual inconsistency documented by psychologist Richard DeMille (1980) concerns Castaneda's contradictory claims: a) that he was hunting rabbits with three men in Sonora, Mexico, on September 6, 1968 (Castaneda, 1972) versus b) that he dated each page of a six-page letter he mailed from Los Angeles to R. Gordon Wasson on that same day (DeMille, 1980).

Another textual inconsistency began when Castaneda proclaimed that the ingestion of three species of sacred plants was integral to his apprenticeship with Don Juan, who "related the use of *Datura stramonium* (jimsonweed) and *Psilocybe mexicana* (sacred mushrooms) to the acquisition of …a (supernatural) power he called an 'ally.'" According to Don Juan using *Lophophora williamsii* (peyote) facilitated acquiring wisdom or "knowledge of the right way to live," (Castaneda, 1969; 1972). In Castaneda's third book, Don Juan revoked the central place he originally attributed to acquiring powerful allies, by using jimsonweed and mushrooms, and learning righteousness from the peyote spirit. Don Juan's new creed emphasized that he had administered psychedelic plants to his apprentice because of Castaneda's "lack of sensitivity" or stubbornness in clinging to his worldview. Using psychedelic plants was merely a strategy Don Juan needed to eradicate an obstacle, which prevented Castaneda from internalizing Don Juan's perspective on sorcery (Castaneda 1974; Fikes, 1996a). Don Juan's downgrading of sacred plant use to a prerequisite for teaching sorcery annulled the tutelary function he originally ascribed to the spirits contained in peyote, Datura and sacred mushrooms. That revision in his teachings meant that he, not the plant spirits, was the source of power that must guide Castaneda.

A corollary to those textual inconsistencies is a remarkable conflict in Castaneda's feelings about Don Juan. Soon after Castaneda smoked a psychedelic mixture of plants prepared by Don Juan, he admitted that he hated Don Juan, "wanted to tear him apart … could have killed him" but was unable to move (1969, p.140). But as Don Juan sang a lullaby, which Castaneda remembered from childhood, he felt "a joyous affection for Don Juan" (1969, p.141). Similarly, Castaneda's books manifest a bizarre vacillation pertaining to who determines what is true, the sorcerer or his apprentice. When Castaneda attempted to describe details of his uncanny disembodied experience under the influence of hallucinogenic plants he smoked, Don Juan interrupted him, declaring that since Castaneda had done nothing significant there was "nothing to talk about" (1969, p.142). Castaneda immediately asked if the way he felt about his experiences was important. Not in relation to those experiences, Don Juan responded (1969, p.142). A few minutes later Castaneda told Don Juan that the only thing he knew about his experience is what he felt, that he did not have a body. Don Juan replied: "That is all there is in reality--what you felt…. How I saw you does not matter" (1969, p.143). Thus, Don Juan's initial judgment, that Castaneda's feelings were irrelevant, was dramatically but inexplicably reversed when he affirmed that Castaneda's feelings were enough to define reality. A similar fluctuation between Castaneda's experience (what he felt) and Don Juan's verdict (what he perceived) is evident in two extraordinary encounters Castaneda had with peyote.

3. Peyote Provides Omens for Don Juan, Garbled Encounters for Castaneda

After ingesting peyote for the first time Castaneda caroused for hours with a black dog in Arizona, according to John, the dog's owner (Castaneda, 1969). Castaneda claimed to remember little of his encounter with that dog. When Castaneda asked about that "business of the dog and

me pissing on each other" Don Juan was emphatic that it was not a dog but was instead the male peyote spirit, which he identified as "Mescalito," an erroneous Spanish name for the peyote spirit. Castaneda asked again, did "the dog really play with me as they say?" Don Juan's answer was adamant: "Goddammit it! It was not a dog!" (Castaneda, 1969, pp.38-40). Although Castaneda remembered little about his peculiar experiences with the dog and felt that it had "been a disastrous event" (1969, p.40) Don Juan defined it as an omen, making it the basis for his momentous decision to accept Castaneda as his apprentice--because "Mescalito," taking possession of the dog, had caroused with Castaneda (1969). Despite Castaneda's distress, inability to recall most of his experiences and failure to recognize that the dog he played with was actually the peyote spirit, Don Juan decided that because this was the first time he ever saw the peyote spirit playing with anybody, he was obliged to select Castaneda as his apprentice. Don Juan's grandiose image of Castaneda being chosen by "Mescalito" trumped Castaneda's own impression that this incident was insignificant. There is no reason to suppose any of Castaneda's assertions about his first peyote experience were true; especially because no Yaqui were performing peyote rituals at that time (Fikes, 1993).

Castaneda's hoaxing becomes obvious in his third book wherein Don Juan repudiated his original assertion, that the benevolent peyote spirit taught righteousness (Castaneda, 1969; 1972), by "admitting" that he administered peyote only to prepare Castaneda to learn sorcery. Such inconsistency implies that Don Juan lied, either about peyote's teaching wisdom or his rationale for selecting Castaneda as his apprentice. Some twenty years later Castaneda complicated this contradiction by proclaiming, without explaining exactly how, that using peyote develops our sensitivity to joys and sadness of this world (Thompson, 1994). All these inconsistencies constitute compelling evidence of fraud.

Castaneda's second significant encounter with peyote discloses a conflict between Castaneda's own experience of seeing his deceased mother and Don Juan's experience of a seeing a light hovering over Castaneda. During a peyote ritual, allegedly in northeastern Mexico, Castaneda heard his deceased mother's voice calling him twice. Then he felt anguish and "began to weep." Suddenly he felt he "needed someone to care for me" and he saw a vision of his mother standing next to him. But instead of comfort, Castaneda felt "the tremendous burden of my mother's love … the memory of my mother filled me with anguish and melancholy… I knew that I had never liked her" (Castaneda, 1972, pp.55-56). Don Juan's judgment was that Castaneda's vision and feelings about his mother were irrelevant, that "whatever I had experienced was nonsense in comparison to the omen" (Castaneda, 1972, p.57). Don Juan regarded this omen as equal in importance to Castaneda's "first experience with 'Mescalito,'" the event which motivated Don Juan to "teach me his knowledge" (1972, pp.56-57). Castaneda sought Don Juan's "interpretation of my vision" but Don Juan was fixated on the fact that "Mescalito's light" was seen by everyone present as it "hovered over" Castaneda. Because "Mescalito" had engulfed Castaneda with his light and given him "a lesson with no other effort on my part than being

around" Don Juan defined it as an omen (1972, p.57). Rejecting Castaneda's feelings as "nonsense" clearly contradicted what Don Juan declared earlier, that Castaneda's feelings, of being disembodied after smoking the psychedelic plant mixture, defined reality. Moreover, Don Juan's obsession with the light Castaneda did not see did nothing to help Castaneda decipher the "lesson" about his troubled relationship with his mother.

If this was such a momentous sign, why didn't Castaneda see that light? Why didn't Don Juan enable Castaneda to comprehend why the hovering light was an omen and why he never liked his mother? Don Juan's defining this as an omen, without empowering Castaneda to comprehend its meaning, contrasts markedly with the coaching Huichol shamans provided to this author on various occasions when they clarified the significance of his paranormal experiences (Fikes, 2011).

4. Plagiarism and Parody in Castaneda's Writing

Richard DeMille (1980, p.354) and this author each concluded that Castaneda's books are a "transparent fraud." Similarly, Weston LaBarre (1911-1996), a renowned specialist in peyote rituals performed in the NAC, condemned Castaneda's first two books as deeply vulgar pseudo-ethnography (LaBarre, 1989). More evidence that Castaneda's books are fiction can be found by citing discrepancies between events in his books and some one thousand reports of independent researchers of peyote rituals, according to LaBarre's tally (1989). For example, Castaneda failed to distinguish the most elementary aspects of peyote meetings he described, including the purpose of such meetings and the ritual leader's identity (Fikes, 1996a; Fikes, 2004). Having done no routine ethnographic research presumably disposed Castaneda toward taking elements or emotions derived from his personal life, e.g., his relationship with his mother or his father (Castaneda, 1969), as well as taking anecdotes, without attribution (plagiarizing), from diverse sources he had read or heard about from UCLA colleagues such as Barbara Myerhoff (DeMille, 1980; Fikes, 1993).

DeMille cited several examples of Castaneda plagiarizing from Petrullo's book, *The Diabolic Root*, which Castaneda "reviewed in the fall of 1962 for Anthropology 250 at UCLA" (DeMille, 1980, p.423). Unbeknownst to DeMille, Castaneda even used the title of Petrullo's book, *The Diabolic Root*, to create an inane parody. Labeling peyote the diabolic root alludes to the hateful tactics and torture Spanish priests and Inquisitors used on indigenous Mexican peyote eaters. Castaneda covertly mocks those zealous colonizers, by claiming that after Don Juan cut the part of the peyote growing above ground (thus leaving the "diabolic" root intact) he "sprinkled the 'wound,' as he called it, with pure sulphur powder which he carried in his leather sack" (Castaneda, 1969, p.99). Unfortunately, most people, DeMille included, were unprepared to appreciate Castaneda's hoaxing, based on Don Juan's sprinkling sulphur, associated with the devil, while leaving the devil's root underground. Castaneda's cryptic joke condones by

ignoring the torture and oppression of native people in colonial Mexico (Fikes, 1996b). Castaneda's insensitivity to native people's veneration of peyote, manifested by using a misnomer, Mescalito, while concomitantly failing to provide any native terms for it, was matched by his inability to provide native names for Datura. Don Juan purportedly used only *yerba del diablo* "devil's weed" to refer to Datura, supposedly because other names for it were a "serious matter;" such names were only to be used in emergencies (Castaneda, 1969). Citing emergencies was an invention Castaneda needed to deflect attention away from having provided only a defamatory, pro-Catholic appellation for this sacred plant.

5. Conclusion: Castaneda's Tragic New Age Legacy

Don Juan is a fictional character. Yaqui in Sonora and Arizona have no history of peyote rituals. These two facts help explain why, by 1975, Castaneda's followers were seeking shamans comparable to Don Juan among the Huichol of Mexico. By 1980 New Age entrepreneurs focused on the Huichol, e.g., Prem Das and Brant Secunda, were extolling Castaneda, aware that peyote was the original cornerstone of his apprenticeship. They and other tour operators began guiding peyote tourists and shaman-seekers into Huichol villages. In recent years peyote tourists have invaded the sacred land where Huichol venerate the peyote spirit. The rising tide of tourists in that area is rapidly depleting peyote and has stimulated Mexican authorities to incarcerate Huichol peyote hunters (Fikes, 1993; 2013).

In the early 1990s Castaneda created a cult, Tensegrity, which taught disciples stylized movements combining "tai chi, modern dance and karate" (Marshall, 2007). He established an inner circle, demanding that his followers sever all family ties or "erase personal history." He seduced women followers and probably induced several of them to commit suicide (Austin, 2007; Marshall, 2007). Castaneda's erratic "acting out" and his insistence that followers cut themselves off entirely from everyone essential to perpetuating their identity exemplified harmful practices described by his followers. Believing Don Juan was real (not a fictional character), Castaneda's colleague, Mel Faber, predicted in 1977 that Don Juan's bizarre behavior would have tragic consequences (Fikes, 1993).

Epilogue by Dr. Jay C. Fikes, March 17, 2021.

I finished writing the preceding essay, summarizing the trajectory of Dr. Carlos Castaneda's career, on March 23, 2013. I submitted it to Professor Bruce Johansen, along with my article, "Native American Church, Peyote Rituals" (Fikes, 2015). This essay (now published in IJE) did not make it into that series for editorial reasons.

However, I am pleased that this essay has finally found a home in the *International Journal of Ecopsychology*, and I appreciate the editors' invitation to comment on the suppression of scholarly criticism of Castaneda by two anthropological experts on peyote rituals, Weston LaBarre and myself.

Extensive first-hand knowledge of peyote rituals informed LaBarre's judgment that Castaneda's first two books had together advanced "our knowledge of peyotism not one whit." Based on decades of research among Native American Church peyotists, LaBarre's indignation with Castaneda's first two books permeated his characterization of Castaneda's second book as "frustratingly and tiresomely dull, posturing pseudo-ethnography and, intellectually, kitsch." He also hinted that Castaneda's need for a "guru" was "diagnostic of the authoritarian personality" and that the "long disquisition of don Juan and the detailing of each confused emotional reaction of the author (Castaneda) … imply either total recall, novelistic talent, or a tape recorder." LaBarre recognized Castaneda's second book was "pseudo-profound, sophomoric and deeply vulgar," full of "self-important and really quite trivial feelings and narcissistic self-preoccupation" (LaBarre 1989: 272; Noel 1976: 39-42). I concur with LaBarre's severe criticisms of Castaneda but believe his review of *A Separate Reality* could have been improved if he had supplied specific examples--by citing page numbers--to support his inferences or generalizations about Castaneda.

This 2013 "summary judgment" I wrote about Castaneda differs from LaBarre's, not only because I tried to document all my critical evaluations of Castaneda by quoting or paraphrasing him (citing page numbers in his books) but also because Castaneda's popularity among American anthropologists has gradually become a rarity. Richard DeMille's exposes (1978, 1980) of Castaneda's "transparent fraud" and my debunking of Castaneda's first four books as essentially pseudo-ethnography (Fikes, 1993) came to represent a consensus of anthropological opinion about Castaneda circa 2007, when the BBC's documentary (Austin 2007) discredited Castaneda. Indeed, that BBC documentary featured the same kind of critical scrutiny LaBarre and I applied to Castaneda's books, including broadcasting my characterization of Castaneda as one of the world's greatest con-artists.

Because Castaneda's fame was already widespread in 1972, the New York Times decision not to publish LaBarre's "harsh" book review appears to exemplify "playing it safe" by ignoring the

lone expert on peyote rituals in favor of helping a rising literary star. But by 2013 Dr. Castaneda had few defenders among American anthropologists.

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