

Entheogenic rituals, shamanism and green psychology

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Abstract

Psychedelic or consciousness-expanding drugs have been studied by Western scientific researchers as adjuncts to psychotherapy while their plant-based equivalents are used in traditional ceremonial context for healing and spiritual practice. Plant extracts from tobacco, coca, coffee and cannabis, used as sacraments in indigenous cultures have become recreational drugs in contemporary society. Research with consciousness-expanding or entheogenic substances such as MDMA, LSD and psilocybin has focused on their value as adjuncts to psychotherapy. The worldwide underground culture has adopted the use of hallucinogenic plants and fungi, such as psilocybe mushrooms, ayahuasca, iboga and peyote, in small group hybrid therapeutic-shamanic ceremonies as well as large scale events such as raves. Core elements of such hybrid rituals are: the structure of a circle, a ritual space and altar of some kind, the presence of an experienced elder or guide, the use of eye-shades or semi-darkness and the cultivation of a respectful, spiritual attitude.

Keywords: Entheogens, psychedelics, hallucinogens, consciousness expansion, MDMA, psilocybe mushrooms, ayahuasca, LSD, hybrid rituals, shamanism

Introduction

My research interest in the potentials of psychedelic drugs for the transformation of consciousness began when I was a graduate student at Harvard University in the early 1960s, studying with Timothy Leary and Richard Alpert (who later became Ram Dass). Subsequently, I became interested in the role of altered states of consciousness (induced by plants and other methods) in three great traditional systems of transformation – shamanism, alchemy and yoga. I have now come to regard shamanic or neo-shamanic ritual use of such plants, along with herbal medicine and organic farming, as part of a worldwide movement toward a more balanced and conscious relationship with the plant realm. In this essay, I review the

role of psychoactive plant medicines and speculate on how they might be integrated into society in a healthy way.

There is a question that has troubled me, and no doubt others, since the earlier heyday of psychedelic research in the 1960s, when many groups and individuals were preoccupied with the problem of assimilating new and powerful mind-altering substances into Western society. The question, simply stated, was this: how did the American Indians succeed in integrating the use of peyote into their culture, including its legal use as a sacrament to this day, when those interested in pursuing consciousness research with drugs in the dominant white culture succeeded only in having the entire field made taboo to research, and any use of the substances a criminal offense punishable by imprisonment? The use of peyote spread from Mexico to the Northern Native American tribes in the latter half of the nineteenth century, and has found acceptance as a sacrament in the ceremonies of the Native American Church. It is recognized as one kind of religious ritual that some of the tribes practice; and it is acknowledged by sociologists for its role as an antidote for alcohol abuse.

This intriguing puzzle in ethnopsychology and social history was relevant to me personally, since I was one of the psychedelic researchers, who saw the enormous transformative potentials of “consciousness expanding” drugs, as we called them, and were eager to continue the research into their psychological significance. It would be fair to state that none of the early explorers in this field, in the fifties and early sixties, had any inkling of the social turmoil that was to come, nor the vehemence of the legal-political reaction. Certainly Albert Hofmann, the Swiss chemist who discovered LSD, an epitome of the cautious, conservative scientist, has testified to his dismay and concern over the proliferation of patterns of abuse of what he so poignantly called his “problem child” (*Sorgenkind*).

Thus resulted the strange paradox that the substances regarded as a social evil and a law-enforcement problem in the mainstream dominant culture are the sacrament of one particular sub-culture within that larger society. Since the surviving Native American cultures are older and in many ways ecologically more sophisticated than the cultures of the European invaders and settlers, the examination of the paradox posed above could lead to some highly interesting considerations.

The answer to the ethnopsychological puzzle became clear to me only after I started observing and participating in a number of other Native American ceremonies that did not involve the use of peyote – such as singing-healing circles, ‘sweat lodge’ and ‘spirit dance’ ceremonies. I noted what many ethnologists have reported: that these

ceremonies were simultaneously religious, medicinal, and psychotherapeutic. The sweat lodge, like the peyote ritual, is regarded as a sacred ceremony, as a form of worship of the Creator; they are also practiced as a form of physical healing; *and* they are used for solving personal and collective psychological problems. Thus it was natural, for those tribes that took up peyote, to add this medium to the others they were already familiar with, as a ceremony that expressed and reinforced the integration of body, mind and spirit.

In the dominant white society by contrast, medicine, psychology and religious spirituality are separated by seemingly insurmountable paradigm differences. The medical, psychological and religious professions and established groups, each separately, were much too frightened by the unpredictable transformations of perception and worldview that psychedelic drugs seemed to trigger. Thus, the dominant society's reaction was fear, followed by prohibition, even of further research. None of the three established professions wanted these consciousness-expanding instruments, and neither did they want anyone else to be able to use them of their own free choice. The implicit assumption was (and is) that people are too ignorant and gullible to be able to make reasoned, informed choices as to how to treat their illnesses, solve their psychological problems, or practice their religion. The fragmented condition of our society is mirrored back to us through these reactions.

For most Native Americans and in indigenous societies in all parts of the world, healing, worship and problem-solving are all subsumed in the one way, which is the way of the Great Spirit, the way of Mother Earth, the traditional way. The integrative understanding given in the peyote visions, or in experiences with plant extracts like *ayahuasca* in South America or *iboga* in Central Africa, is not feared, but accepted and respected. Here the implicit assumption is that everyone has the capability, indeed the responsibility, to attune themselves to higher spiritual sources of knowledge and take responsibility for their own health-maintaining and spiritual practices. The purpose of ceremony, with or without medicinal substances, is regarded as a facilitating of such attunement. Indeed, the word "medicine" is used in Native American circles to refer to any substance, practice, even words, or persons – with a kind of integrative spiritual power.

The revival of interest in shamanic practices of healing and divination can be seen as expressions of a worldwide seeking for the renewal of a spiritual relationship with the natural world. Over the past two millennia Western civilization has increasingly developed patterns of domination and exploitation based on arrogant assumptions of human superiority. This dominator pattern has involved the gradual dis-enchantment and enormous destruction of non-human nature. By contrast, many indigenous

people with shamanic practices have maintained beliefs and values that honor and respect the integrity, indeed the sacredness, of all of nature, in its infinite variety of manifestations. Their life-style includes rituals of remembrance of the living intelligences, called “spirits”, inherent in the natural world.

In the modern worldview, such a recognition of “spirits” in nature, is considered beyond the pale of reason. ‘Spiritual’ and ‘natural’ are virtually considered opposites. However, those seekers who are again practicing the shamanic methods of earlier times and cultures are rediscovering that these methods are not at all incompatible with the curiosity and respectful knowledge-seeking of a scientific explorer or researcher. The revival of shamanic ritual practices and an animistic worldview can be seen as part of a worldwide human response to the degradation of ecosystems and the biosphere. These groups and individuals are expressing a new awareness, as well as a revival of ancient awareness of the organic and spiritual interconnectedness of all life on this planet.

Psychedelics as sacrament or recreation

Several observers, including Andrew Weil among others, have pointed out the historical pattern that as Western colonial society adopted psychoactive plant or food substances from native cultures, the pattern of use of such psychoactive materials *devolved* from sacramental to recreational. *Tobacco* was historically regarded as a sacred or power plant by Indians of North, Central and South America and is still so regarded by Native Americans. However, in the white Western culture, and in countries influenced by this dominant culture, cigarette smoking is obviously recreational, and tobacco addiction become a major public health problem. The *coca* plant, as grown and used by the Andean Indian tribes, was treated as a divinity, *Mama Coca*, and valued for its health- and energy-maintaining properties. The concentrated extract *cocaine* on the other hand is purely a recreational drug and its indiscriminate use as such has led to serious public health problems. In this, and other instances, desacralization of the plant-drug has been accompanied by criminalization. Even our most popular stimulant *coffee* is an example of this trend: Apparently first discovered and used by Islamic Sufis, who valued its stimulant properties for long nights of prayer and meditation, it became a fashionable recreational drink in European society in the 17th century, and was even banned for a while as being too dangerous. And *cannabis*, used by some sects of Hindu Tantrism as an amplifier of visualization and meditation and by manual laborers as a relaxant, has become the epitome of the recreational “high”, associated with jail terms for simple possession.

Since sacramental healing plants were so rapidly and completely desacralized upon being adopted by the West's increasingly materialistic culture, it is not surprising that newly discovered synthetic psychactive drugs have generally been very quickly categorized as either recreational or narcotic – even those, like the psychedelics, whose effects are the opposite of “sleep-inducing”. Concomitantly, as the indiscriminate and non-sacramental use of psychoactive plants and newly synthesized analogs spread, so did patterns of abuse and dependence. Predictably, established society reacted with prohibitions, which in turn furthered organized crime activities. This is so in spite of the fact that many of the original discoverers of the new synthetic psychedelics, people such as Albert Hofmann and Alexander Shulgin, are individuals of deep spiritual integrity. Neither they, nor the efforts of philosophers such as Aldous Huxley, Alan Watts and Huston Smith, or psychologists such as Leary, Alpert and many others, to advocate a sacred and respectful attitude towards these substances, were able to prevent the same profanation from taking place.

The later discovered phenethylamine psychedelic (also called *empathogenic*) MDMA provides an instructive example of this phenomenon. Two patterns of use seem to have become established during the 1970s: some psychotherapists and spiritually inclined individuals began to explore its possible applications as a therapeutic adjuvant and as an amplifier of spiritual practice. Another, much larger group of individuals began using it for recreational purposes, as a social “high” comparable in some respects to cocaine. The irresponsible and widespread use in this second category by increasing numbers of people understandably made the medical and law-enforcement authorities nervous. The predictable reaction occurred: MDMA was classified as a Schedule I drug in the United States, which puts it in the same group as heroin, cannabis and LSD, making it a criminal offense to make, use or sell, and sending a clearly understood taboo signal to pharmaceutical and medical researchers.

After Albert Hofmann had identified psilocybin as the psychoactive ingredient in the Mexican ‘magic mushroom’ (*Psilocybe mexicana*), he brought some of the synthesized psilocybin to the Mazatec shamaness Maria Sabina, in order to obtain her assessment of how close the synthesized ingredient was to the natural product. In doing so, he was following the appropriate path of acknowledging the primacy of the botanical over the synthetic. It has been suggested that for everyone of the important synthetic psychedelics, there is some natural plant that has the same ingredients, and that perhaps it should be our research strategy – to find the botanical “host” for the psychedelics emerging from the laboratory. Research on the shamanic use of the hallucinogenic morning glory seeds called *ololuhqui* in ancient Mexico, which contain LSD analogs, has enabled a deeper understanding of the possibilities of this

substance.

If Wasson, Hofmann and Ruck are correct in their proposal that an LSD-like ergot-derived beverage was used as the initiatory sacrament in Eleusis, the implications are profound. According to Rupert Sheldrake's theory of morphogenetic fields, rituals, like any patterned activity, gain their power through precise repetition of all the elements. One could suppose that by re-growing or re-hybridizing this particular plant, as it was used in ancient times, we could “tune in” to and re-activate the morphogenetic field of the Eleusinian Mysteries, the ancient world's most awe-inspiring mystical ritual.

There is no inherent reason why sacramental use and recreational use of a substance in moderation cannot co-exist. In fact, among Native Americans, tobacco often does play this dual role: after a sacred pipe ritual with tobacco and other herbs, participants may smoke cigarettes to relax. We know the sacramental use of wine, in the Catholic communion rite, and we certainly know the recreational use of wine. We are able to keep the two contexts separate, and we are also able to recognize when recreational use becomes dependence and abuse. One could envision similar sophistication developing with regard to psychoactive plant products. There could be recognized sacramental and therapeutic applications; and certain patterns of use might develop that were more playful, exploratory and hedonistic – and yet could be contained within a reasonable and acceptable social framework that minimizes harm.

The abuse of a drug in such a rational and sensible system would not be a function of who uses it, or where it originated, or its chemical classification – but rather the behavioral consequences in the drug user. Someone becomes recognized as an alcoholic, that is an abuser of alcohol, when their interpersonal and social relationships are noticeably impaired. There should be no difficulty in establishing similar abuse criteria for other psychoactive drugs.

Consciousness research with entheogens

In the field of consciousness research, the “set-and-setting hypothesis”, which was first formulated by Timothy Leary in the early sixties, helps us to understand psychoactive drugs and plants as one class of triggers within a whole range of possible catalysts of altered states. The theory states that *the content of a psychedelic experience is a function of the set (intention, attitude, personality, mood) and the setting (interpersonal, social and environmental)*; and that the drug functions as a kind of trigger, or catalyst, or non-specific amplifier (To a lesser extent, the determining role of set-and-setting also applies to other psychoactive drugs such as the stimulants

and tranquilizers). The hypothesis can also be applied to the understanding of any altered state of consciousness, when we recognize that other kinds of stimuli can be triggers – for example hypnotic induction, meditation technique, *mantra*, sound or music, breathing, sensory isolation, movement, sex, natural landscapes, a near-death experience, and the like.

An important clarification results from keeping in mind the distinction between a state (of consciousness) and a psychological trait; between state changes and trait changes. For example, psychologists distinguish between state-anxiety and trait-anxiety. William James, in his classic *Varieties of Religious Experience*, discussed this question in terms of whether a religious or conversion experience would necessarily lead to more “saintliness”, more enlightened traits. This distinction is crucial to the assessment of the value or significance of drug-induced altered states. Only by attending to both the state-changes (visions, insights, feelings), *and* the longer-term behavioral or trait changes, can a comprehensive understanding of these phenomena be attained.

Having an insight is not the same as being able to apply that insight. There is no inherent connection between a mystical experience of oneness and the expression or manifestation of that oneness in the affairs of everyday life. This point is perhaps obvious, yet it is frequently overlooked by those who argue that, on principle, a drug could not induce a genuine mystical experience, or play any role in spiritual life. The internal factors, including preparation, expectation and intention, are the determinants of whether a given experience is authentically religious. Equally, intention is crucial to the question of whether an altered state results in any lasting personality changes. Intention is like a kind of bridge from the ordinary or consensus reality state to the state of heightened consciousness; and it also can provide a bridge from that heightened state back to ordinary reality.

This model allows us to understand why the same drug(s) could be claimed by some to lead to *nirvana* or religious vision, and in others could lead to perversion, violence and criminality. The drug is only a tool, or a catalyst, to attain certain altered states – which altered states being dependent on the intention. Further, even where the drug-induced state is benign and expansive, whether or not it leads to long-lasting positive changes is also a matter of intention or mind-set, as well as on-going practice.

The potential of psychedelic drugs to act as catalysts to a transformation into *gnosis*, or direct, ongoing awareness of divine reality, even if only in a small number of people, would seem to be of the utmost significance. Traditionally, the number of individuals who had mystical experiences has been very small; the number of those

who have been able to make practical applications of such experiences has probably been even smaller. Thus the discovery of psychedelics, in facilitating such experiences and processes, could be regarded as one very important factor in a general spiritual awakening of collective human consciousness. Other factors that could be mentioned in this connection are the revolutionary paradigm shifts in the physical and biological sciences, the burgeoning of interest in Eastern philosophies and spiritual disciplines, and the growing awareness of the multi-cultural oneness of the human family brought about by the global communications networks.

Entheogenic substances in shamanistic cultures

In earlier writings, I emphasized the newness of psychedelic drugs and the unimaginable potentials to be realized by their constructive application. I viewed them as first products of a technology oriented toward the human spirit. I still appreciate the potential role of the new synthetic psychedelics in consciousness research, and perhaps consciousness evolution. However, my views have changed somewhat under the influence of the discoveries and writings of cultural anthropologists and ethnobotanists, who have pointed to the role of mind-altering and visionary botanicals in traditional cultures across the world. In such a worldview, closer to that of aboriginal cultures, humanity is seen as being in a relationship of co-consciousness, communication and cooperation with the animal kingdom, the plant kingdom and the mineral world. In such cultures, the ingestion of hallucinogenic plant preparations in order to obtain knowledge – for healing, for prophecy, for communication with spirits, for anticipation of danger, and for understanding the universe, appears as one of the oldest and most highly treasured traditions.

One cannot read the works of R. Gordon Wasson on the Mesoamerican mushroom cults, or the work of Richard E. Schultes on the profusion of hallucinogens in the Amazon region, or the cross-cultural studies of such authors as Michael Harner, Joan Halifax, Peter Furst, Wade Davis and Luis Eduardo Luna, or the cross-culturally oriented medical and psychiatric researchers such as Andrew Weil, Claudio Naranjo and Stanislav Grof, or more personal accounts such as the writings of Carlos Castaneda, or the McKenna brothers, or Bruce Lamb's biography of Manuel Cordova, without getting a strong sense of the pervasiveness of the quest for visions, insights and non-ordinary states of consciousness in the worldwide shamanic traditions. These studies demonstrate that psychoactive plants and fungi are used in many, though by no means all of the shamanic cultures that pursue such states. In the shamanistic cultures of the Northern hemisphere, in America, Europe and Asia, the use of the drumming-journey method appears more widespread – possibly because

there is a relative paucity of visionary hallucinogens in the temperate zones, as compared to the tropics.

Shamanic cultures all over the world know a wide variety of means for entering non-ordinary realities. Michael Harner has pointed out that “auditory driving” with prolonged drumming is perhaps as equally a widespread technology for entering shamanic states as the use of hallucinogens. In some cultures, the rhythmic hyperventilation produced through certain kinds of chanting may be another form of altered state trigger. Animal spirits become guides and allies in shamanic initiation. Plant spirits can become “helpers” also, even when the plant is not taken internally by either doctor or patient. Tobacco smoke used as a purifier, as well as a support to prayer, is actually the most widely used psychoactive plant substance in indigenous and mestizo South American societies. In some traditions crystals are also used in ceremonies, in addition to plants, to focus energy for seeing and healing. There is attunement, through prayer and meditation, with deities and spirits of the land, the four directions, the elements, the Creator Spirit. The knowledge obtained from other states and other worlds is used to improve the way we live in this world. The use of hallucinogenic plants, when it occurs, is usually part of an integrated complex of interrelationships between nature, spirit and human consciousness.

Thus it seems to me that the lessons we are to learn from these consciousness-expanding plants in shamanism have to do not only with the recognition of other dimensions of the human psyche, but with a radically different worldview – a world view that has been maintained in the beliefs, practices and rituals of many indigenous shamanic cultures, and almost totally forgotten or suppressed by the materialist culture of the modern age. There is of course a certain delightful irony in the fact that it has taken a material substance to awaken the sleeping consciousness of so many of our contemporaries to the reality of non-material energies, forms and beings.

The potentials of entheogens in healing ritual practices

If we compare how Western medicine and psychotherapy have, so far, incorporated psychedelics into healing practice (really only on a very limited research basis), with shamanic healing ceremonies involving entheogenic plant substances, a perception of the importance of ritual is inescapable. The traditional shamanic ceremonial form involving hallucinogenic plants is a carefully structured experience, in which a small group of people come together with respectful, spiritual attitude to share a profound inner journey of healing and transformation, facilitated by these powerful catalysts.

A “journey” is the preferred metaphor in shamanistic societies for what we call an “altered state of consciousness”.

There are three significant differences between shamanic entheogenic ceremonies and the typical psychedelic psychotherapy. *One* is that the traditional shamanic rituals involve very little or no talking among the participants, except perhaps during a preparatory phase, or after the experience to clarify the teachings and visions received. The *second* is that singing, or the shaman's singing, is invariably considered essential to the success of the healing or divinatory process. Furthermore the singing typical in entheogenic rituals usually has a fairly rapid beat, similar to the rhythmic pulse in shamanic drumming journeys. Psychically, the rhythmic chanting, like the drum pulse, seems to give support for moving through the flow of visions, and minimize the likelihood of getting stuck in frightening or seductive experiences. The *third* distinctive feature of traditional ceremonies is that they are almost always done in darkness or low light, – which facilitates the emergence of visions. The exception is the peyote ceremony, done around a fire (though also at night); here participants may see visions as they stare into the fire.

I will briefly mention some of the variations on the traditional rituals involving hallucinogens. In the *peyote* ceremonies of the Native American Church, in North America, participants sit in a circle, in a tipi, on the ground, around a blazing central fire. The ceremony goes all night, and is conducted by a “roadman”, with the assistance of a drummer, a firekeeper and a cedar-man (for purification). A staff and rattle are passed around and participants sing the peyote songs, which involve a rapid, rhythmic beat. The peyote ceremonies of the Huichol Indians of Northern Mexico also take place around a fire, with much singing and story-telling, after the long group pilgrimage to find the rare cactus.

The ceremonies of the *San Pedro* cactus, in the Andean regions, are sometimes also done around a fire, with singing; but sometimes the *curandero* sets up an altar, on which are placed different symbolic figurines and objects, representing the light and dark spirits which one is likely to encounter.

The mushroom ceremonies (*velada*) of the Mazatec Indians of Mexico, involve the participants sitting or lying in a very dark room, with only a small candle. The healer, who may be a woman or a man, sings almost uninterruptedly, throughout the night, weaving into her chants the names of Christian saints, her spirit allies and the spirits of the Earth, the elements, animals and plants, the sky, the waters and the fire.

Traditional Amazonian Indian or mestizo ceremonies with ayahuasca also involve a small group sitting in a circle, in semi-darkness, while the initiated healers sing the

songs (*icaros*), through which the healing and/or diagnosis takes place. These songs also have a fairly rapid rhythmic pulse, which keeps the flow of the experience moving along. Shamanic “sucking” methods of extracting toxic psychic residues or sorcerous implants are sometimes used.

The ceremonies involving the root of the African *iboga* plant, used by the Bwiti cult in Gabon and Zaïre, involve an altar with ancestral and deity images, and people sitting on the floor with much chanting and some dancing. Often, there is a mirror in the assembly room, in which the initiates may “see” their ancestral spirits.

In comparing Western psychoactive-assisted psychotherapy with shamanic entheogenic healing rituals, we can see that the role of an experienced guide or therapist is equally central in both, and the importance of set (intention) and setting is implicitly recognized and articulated into the forms of the ritual. The underlying intention in both practices is healing and problem resolution. Therapeutic results can occur with both approaches, though the underlying paradigms of illness and treatment are completely different. The two elements in the shamanic traditions that pose the most direct and radical challenge to the accepted Western worldview are the existence of multiple worlds and of spirit beings – such conceptions are considered completely beyond the pale of both reason and science, though they are taken for granted in the worldview of traditional shamanistic societies.

It is worth mentioning that in the case of *ayahuasca*, there have grown in Brazil three distinct syncretic religious movements or churches, that incorporate the taking of ayahuasca into their religious ceremonies as the central sacrament. Here the intention of the ritual is not so much healing or therapeutic insight, as it is strengthening moral values and community bonds. The ceremonial forms here resemble much more the rituals of worship in a church, than they resemble either a psychotherapist’s office, or a shamanic healing session.

There are also several different kinds of set-and-setting rituals using hallucinogens in the modern West, ranging from the casual, recreational “tripping” of a few friends to “rave” events of hundreds or even thousands, combining Ecstasy (MDMA) with the continuous rhythmic pulse of techno music. My own research has focussed on what might be called neo-shamanic medicine circles, which represent a kind of hybrid of the psychotherapeutic and traditional shamanic approaches. In the past forty years or so I have been a participant and observer in hundreds of such circle rituals, in both Europe and North America. Plant entheogens used in these circle rituals have included psilocybe mushrooms, ayahuasca, san pedro cactus, iboga and others. My interest has focussed on the nature of the psychospiritual transformation undergone

by participants in such circle rituals.

In these hybrid therapeutic-shamanic circle rituals certain basic elements from traditional shamanic healing ceremonies are usually, though not always, kept intact:

- the structure of a circle, with participants either sitting or lying;
- an altar in the center of the circle, or a fire in the center if outside;
- presence of an experienced elder or guide, sometimes with assistants;
- preference for low light, or semi-darkness; sometimes eye-shades are used;
- use of music: drumming, rattling, singing or evocative recorded music;
- dedication of ritual space through invocation of spirits of four directions;
- cultivation of a respectful, spiritual attitude.

Experienced entheogenic explorers understand the importance of set and therefore devote considerable attention to clarifying their intentions with respect to healing and divination. They also understand the importance of setting and therefore devote considerable care to arranging a peaceful place and time, filled with natural beauty and free from outside distractions or interruptions.

Most of the participants in circles of this kind that I have observed were experienced in one or more psychospiritual practices, including shamanic drum journeying, Buddhist *vipassana* meditation, tantra yoga and holotropic breathwork and most have experienced and/or practiced various forms of psychotherapy and body-oriented therapy. The insights and learnings from these practices are woven by the participants into their work with the entheogenic medicines. Participants tend to confirm that the entheogenic plant medicines, when combined with meditative or therapeutic insight processes, function to amplify awareness and sensitize perception, particularly amplifying somatic, emotional and instinctual awareness.

Some variation of the *talking staff* or *singing staff* is often used in such ceremonies: with this practice, which seems to have originated among the Indians of the Pacific Northwest, and is also more generally now referred to as “council”, only the person who has the circulating staff sings or speaks, and there is no discussion, questioning or interpretation (as there might be in the usual group psychotherapy formats). Some group sessions however involve minimal or no interaction between the participants during the time of the expanded state of consciousness.

In preparation for the circle ritual there is usually a sharing of intentions and purposes among the participants, as well as the practice of meditation, or sometimes solo time in nature, or expressive arts modalities, such as drawing, painting or

journal work. After the circle ritual, sometimes the morning after, there is usually an integration practice of some kind, which may involve participants sharing something of the lessons learned and to be applied in their lives.

Concluding reflections

It appears incontrovertible that plant (and fungal) hallucinogens played some role, of unknown extent, in the healing and transformative traditions of shamanism. If we regard psychotherapy as the modern descendant of these traditions, then a similar, if limited, application of hallucinogens could be made in various aspects of psychotherapy. And this has in fact already occurred, as the various studies of psychedelics in alcoholism, terminal cancer, obsessional neurosis, depression and other conditions testify. It seems likely that these kinds of applications of psychedelics, as adjuncts to psychotherapy, will continue, – if not with LSD and other Schedule I drugs, then with other, newer, perhaps safer psychedelics.

What appears unlikely to me is that this kind of controlled psychiatric application will ever be enough to satisfy the inclinations and needs of those individuals who wish to explore psychedelics in their most ancient role, as tools for seeking visionary states and hidden forms of knowledge. The fact that the serious use of hallucinogens, outside of a psychiatric framework, continues despite severe social and legal sanctions, suggests that this is a kind of individual freedom that is not easy to abolish. It also suggests that there is a strong need, in certain people, to re-establish their connections with ancient traditions of knowledge, in which visionary states of consciousness and exploration of other realities, with or without hallucinogens, were the central concern.

It may be that such a path will always be pursued by only a limited number of individuals – much as the shamanic, alchemical and yogic initiations and practices were pursued by only a few individuals in each society. I find it a hopeful sign that some, however few, are willing to explore how to re-connect with these lost sources of knowledge, because, like many others, I feel that our materialist-technological society, with its fragmented world-view, has largely lost its way, and can ill afford to ignore any potential aids to greater knowledge of the human mind. The ecologically balanced and integrative framework of understanding that the ancient traditions preserved surely has much to offer us.

Furthermore, it is clear that the visions and insights of the individuals who pursue these paths are visions and insights for the present and the future, and not just of historical or anthropological interest. This has always been the pattern: the individual

seeks a vision to understand his or her place, or destiny, as a member of the community. The knowledge derived from expanded states of consciousness has been, can be, and needs to be applied to the solution of the staggering problems that confront our species. This is why the discoveries of the mystical chemists and ethnobotanists have immense importance – for the understanding of our past, the awareness of our presence, and the safeguarding of our future.

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