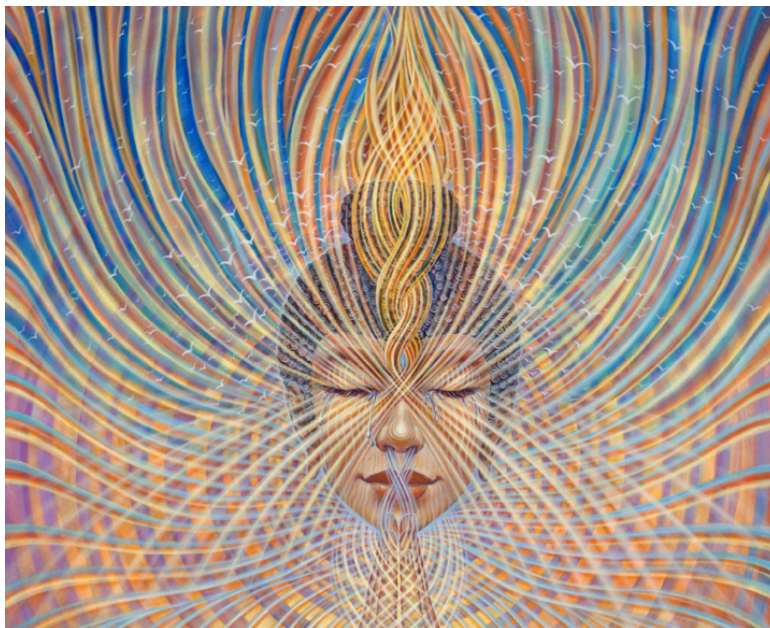


DRUGS, SPIRITUALITY AND THERAPY

A history of psychedelic plant powers



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Introduction

Plants are powerful. Humans and plants have shared a symbiotic relationship for millennia. The use of substances and extracts derived from plants can be seen in mythological texts and epics as well as in archaeological evidence. These historical aspects of drugs, seen through the lens of religion, indigenous culture and mythology, might offer valuable insight on the use of psychoactive, specifically psychedelic, drugs today to achieve spiritual states. Depictions and evidence of these mind-altering substances can be witnessed throughout religious history in anthropological contexts. Through this paper, we will trace this relationship shared between humans and plants, from mythic times to the present, placing special emphasis on psychedelic substances used as *entheogens* - psychoactive substances used in a shamanic, mystical or spiritual context rather than for recreational purposes. Furthermore, we will discuss the medicinal benefits of psychedelics and how these *entheogenic* experiences are associated with their therapeutic potential in psychiatry, mental healthcare and medicine.

Psychedelics in religion and ancient cultures

The use of plant powers as teachers and allies serves as the common denominator between various religions and cultures throughout history. Archeological and anthropological evidence have shown people using naturally-occurring plant and fungus based psychedelics as early as 3500 B.C. for religious ceremonies, spiritual initiations and as an analgesic. The Hindu epic *Rigveda* mentions a similar plant-extract ritual drink *Soma*, whose consumption has said to produce god-like longevity. In ancient Greek mythology, this drink was called *Ambrosia*, which means “immortality” in Greek. It is believed that these drinks have been derived from hallucinogenic plants or psychedelic mushrooms. In ancient Greek culture, in the town of Eleusis, a six-day festival called the great Mystery was observed at the time of harvest. On the

last day of the festival, all the citizens consumed a potion called *kykeon* - which has said said to produce mystical visions and encounters with the divine. When Albert Hoffman discovered LSD (*lysergic acid diethylamide*) in 1938, he attributed this entheogenic experience to a fungus called ergotamine, the plant from which LSD is isolated, which coincidentally also infested the fields near Eleusis. (To Higher Consciousness, 2015) The ritualized use of drugs such as psilocybin mushrooms, *amanita muscaria* and peyote, which contains mescaline, as entheogens can also be witnessed in ancient shamanic healing and psychotherapy. Shamans or “religious healers” ingested these substances, and tried to attain altered states of consciousness in order to better diagnose and treat illnesses by invoking the power of the spirits. Indigenous Amazonian tribes and shamans in the Amazonian rainforest created a concoction called *Ayahwasca*, which was used in initiation ceremonies and traditional spiritual medicine. It is believed that this brew, which was a mixture of *caapi vine* and other plant ingredients, contained the hallucinogen DMT (N,N-Dimethyltryptamine). Similarly, in ancient Egypt, *Nymphaea caerulea* or the sacred blue waterlily was an entheogenic plant, which the Egyptians believed was an avatar of the sun-god Ra. The plant, which only bloomed for 3 days an year, was used in religious ceremonies, by Egyptian healers, and by regular people to connect with the divine. The flower contained the psychoactive substance aporphine and is said to have natural sedative, anti-spasmodic, anti-anxiety and aphrodisiac properties. (Forti, 2015) As a result, ancient entheogen users used psychedelics to transcend into altered states of consciousness, interact with the spirit world, and channel those energies into this realm. Current psychedelic users also operate within the same themes, believing that these substances have medical benefits that are both physical and psychological, as they open up the mind to a religious or mystical dimension.

Psychedelics and the modern world

The modern world was first introduced to psychedelics after Swiss chemist Albert Hofmann, who worked for Sandoz Pharmaceuticals, first synthesized LSD in 1938 in his laboratory. In the 1950s, Americans Gordon Wasson and Alan Richardson travelled to a small Indian village Mexico in search of the psilocybin mushrooms. (Thoricatha, 2015) After interacting with the Mazatec tribe, who practised indigenous shamanism using powerful hallucinogenic plants such as psychedelic mushrooms and *salvia divinorum*, they consumed the “divine” mushrooms. Wasson documented his deeply philosophical experience in a photo essay called “Seeking the Magic Mushroom” published in Life magazine in 1957. This article introduced the west to psychedelics and inspired the western public to search for, learn more about and experience these “sacred” mushrooms and other psychedelics. The universal popularity of the article led to hippies, famous personalities and tourists travelling to experience “magic mushrooms” in order to undertake these spiritual experiences. (Thoricatha, 2015) In 1953, famous author Aldous Huxley released the book *The Doors of Perception*, documenting his experience with the psychedelic mescaline. In 1958, Dr. Humphrey Osmond coined the term *psychedelic* i.e. “mind-manifesting” to refer to these hallucinogenic substances. This led to the 1960s being referred to as the *psychedelic era*, with these drugs having strong influences on music, artistry and social culture. Their growing popularity and widespread acceptance of this class of drugs lead to extensive research into them in the 1950s-1960s for psychotherapy and as medication for psychiatric treatment. Sandoz Pharmaceutical started distributing doses of LSD to encourage clinical studies and research into the medical benefits of psychedelics. In 1960, Sandoz sent pharmaceuticals to psychologist Dr. Timothy Leary, who started the *Harvard Psilocybin Project*. Leary popularized the use of LSD for recreational purposes, with one of his

famous counter-culture catchphrases “Turn on, tune in, drop out”. He also advocated research into the therapeutic use of psychedelics in psychiatry. However, within a decade, after the introduction of the Controlled Substances Act which listed LSD as a Schedule I substance, research into psychedelics died out.

Current use of psychedelics

As the examples above illustrate, plants such as psilocybin mushrooms, ayahuasca, soma, peyote and ergotamine have been used for centuries for their metaphysical and psychological impacts. (Tupper, 2002) Due to this rich background of psychedelics used as entheogens throughout history and mythology, current perception of these drugs is dominated by the belief that psychedelic drugs help induce religious experiences. This potential of psychedelics to open up the mind to “the God within” through profound spiritual experiences can lead to efficacious therapeutic benefits. (Phelps, 2016) Due to this, research into the medical benefits of psychedelics, especially for psychotherapy, has again been revived after a long hiatus.

Potential therapeutic value of psychedelics

Psychedelic psychotherapy has probably originated from man’s prehistoric and mythological knowledge of plant powers. Since ancient times, *shamans* or healers have used psychedelics to channel the spirit powers to treat and cure diseases. Psychotherapeutic practice can also be found in the rituals of many ancient cultures. Due to the extremely potent mind-altering effects of LSD, Albert Hofmann referred to it as *psycholytic* - inducing psychosis. This led to the development of psycholytic-therapy models using LSD, which was used to treat patients suffering from depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder, obsessive-compulsive disorder and other mental illnesses. This is because psychedelics weaken one’s psychological

defenses and their therapeutic effects stem from this beneficial exploration of the psyche. As a result, the entheogenic experience could spur up previously buried emotions and lead to the resolution of internal conflicts. (Metzner, 1998) In addition to this, the deeply spiritual experiences could also act as a cushion, protecting against stressful events in life and increasing coping ability. (McGreal, 2012)

Humphrey Osmond and Canadian chemist Abram Hoffer considered LSD an extremely promising option to treat alcoholism and other addictions. Most of the research linking psychedelics with addiction treatment was conducted in the 1960s. However, clinical research on the use of psychedelics such as LSD, ibogaine and psilocybin to treat alcohol, nicotine, and other addictions has picked up in the past decade. It is believed that the therapeutic effects of these drugs can be highly effective in promoting abstinence, hence helping long-time smokers and alcoholics. (Nichols, 2016) According to the report of a study testing the addiction-treatment benefits of psilocybin, “smoking cessation outcomes were significantly correlated with measures of mystical experience on drug session days.” (Nichols, 2016) It is believed that through these deeply introspective experiences, psychedelics re-prioritize the actions of substance addicts, hence giving them the power to treat their addiction. Furthermore, psychedelics are also believed to have tremendous therapeutic value, with other potential benefits that include treatment for autism and schizophrenia, increasing cognitive function and creativity, treatment of cluster headaches, and relieving stress in patients with terminal illnesses. (Nichols, 2016) Although preliminary and pilot studies in these areas have shown promising results, large-scale clinical trials are yet to be undertaken due to strict government regulations.

Conclusion

Psychedelics, since historic times, have been used as a sacrament in culture, mythology and religion. It seems that the efficacy of psychedelic therapy is deeply related with the use of these substances in the entheogenic rituals of many cultures. Psychedelic therapy might have emerged from the mythological and prehistoric knowledge of these hallucinogenic plant powers. The mystical experiences associated with the consumption of psychedelics seem to play an important role when talking about the therapeutic effects of these drugs. Psychedelic therapy is powerful because a psychedelic experience can be profoundly significant in one's life. Some say by encouraging beneficial exploration into one's psyche, these entheogenic "trips" can lead to an increase in a person's positivity, enhance their creativity and give them a more "open" personality. (McGreal, 2012) The immense potential that psychedelics have definitely warrants more research looking into their use for medicinal purposes. Psychedelics have the potential to revolutionize mental healthcare, psychiatry and medicine and so, it seems almost essential to unravel the psychopharmacological mysteries associated with them.

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