

Culture and Consciousness

For several hours after drinking the brew, I found myself, although awake, in a world literally beyond my wildest dreams. . . . Transported into a trance where the supernatural seemed natural, I realized that anthropologists, including myself, had profoundly underestimated the importance of the drug in affecting native ideology.

—Michael Harner¹

As psychedelics and altered states imploded into Western consciousness, anthropologists naturally turned attention to their role in other cultures. And what they found was startling. Fully ninety percent of the world's cultures have one or more institutionalized altered states of consciousness, and in traditional societies these are almost without exception sacred states. As the anthropologist Erika Bourguignon put it, this is "a striking finding and suggests we are, indeed, dealing with a matter of major importance."² Psychedelics are one method used to induce these sacred states, and have played a role in shaping cultures, especially tribal cultures, in areas as diverse as ritual, art, spirituality, and myth. Moreover, their long history of use extends back over thousands of years.

Anthropologists quickly learned that psychedelics are used conscientiously in these cultures. They are traditionally employed ritually for specific sacred and healing purposes. Their use is almost invariably regarded as beneficial to the individual and community.

Such an approach contrasts starkly with their popular use in the West. Especially in the turbulent 1960s, though many benefited, there were also casualties, misuse, and abuse. However, from a cross-cultural perspective this is hardly surprising; there was little understanding of their use, minimal social support, and no established ritual or sacred context to draw upon. Far from being valued by the wider community, psychedelics were quickly banned.

This raises an intriguing question: What exactly determines a drug's acceptability in a culture? Surely the overwhelming determining factor

should be the extent of morbidity and mortality it produces. But a moment's reflection suggests that this plays merely a minor role. Witness, for example, the wholesale but perfectly legal massacre produced by smoking tobacco, which accounts for nearly half a million deaths in the United States each year³ and over four million worldwide.⁴ Contrast this with the far smaller, but still tragic, approximately seventeen thousand U.S. deaths from all illegal *and* pharmaceutical drugs combined.⁵ Yet the U.S. government spends billions to imprison marijuana growers and until recently spent billions to subsidize tobacco growers.

With regard to a drug's cultural acceptability, several factors other than toxicity seem much more important. The first of these is how long a drug has been in use in the culture. When initially introduced to England, tobacco use was viewed as disgusting and punishable, while Russian smokers were flogged and had their nostrils slit. However, the longer a drug remains in a culture the more likely it is to gain acceptance.

A second factor is the lag phase between use and the onset of complications. Strychnine is said to produce an impressive high, but since death may follow within minutes it has never attained popularity.

A third factor is economic: How deeply is the drug imbedded in the economic system, and how many people profit from it?

Then there is the distribution of drug use across social classes. When a drug is used primarily by people outside the mainstream, it is likely to be stigmatized and illegalized. On the other hand, as the saying goes, "a drug is not a drug when members of the ruling class use it."

A final factor seems to concern the congruence between the experiences produced by the drug and the values of the mainstream culture. Psychedelics can clearly produce experiences outside, and often antagonistic to, the conventional Western world-view. As such they seemed threatening and were soon ruled to be illegitimate.

Clearly the cross-cultural study of psychedelics has much to teach us about *consciousness and cultures, including our own.*

NOTES

1. M. Harner, "The sound of rushing water," in *Hallucinogens and Shamanism*, ed. M. Harner, 16-17. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973).

2. E. Bourguignon, ed. *Religion, Altered States of Consciousness, and Social Change*. (Columbus: Ohio State University, 1973), 11.

3. Drug War Facts web page, www.drugwarfacts.org/causes.htm#tobacco (accessed February 13, 2004).

4. World Health Organization web page, www.who.int/tobacco/health_impact/en (accessed February 13, 2004).

5. Reconsider.org web page, www.reconsider.org/issues/public_health/estimated_deaths.htm (accessed February 13, 2004).