

RATIONAL ECSTASY?: CONDITIONS OF POSSIBILITY OF ENTHEOGENIC PRACTICE IN THE MODERN US

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I received a one thousand dollar grant from MAPS to support research for my undergraduate thesis relating to entheogens. This funding provided me with the opportunity to visit several groups in Holland who use ayahuasca legally in a religious context. I graduated from New College of Florida in May 2002, and my thesis is available through the MAPS website.

In Search of Ayahuasca in the Netherlands

I began my research in Den Haag in January, hosted by Hans Bogers of the Den Haag branch of the Santo Daime church. We met at his house and then proceeded to the location where that night's 'work' was being held.

Having navigated our way through several alleys feeding into a larger road in downtown Den Haag, we came upon a gate guarding the door to an old cathedral. Once the home of Catholic nuns, it had now become a multi-purpose building, hosting a variety of activities including children's day care, yoga sessions, and Santo Daime 'works'. Having stepped over the brightly colored toys littering the stoop, we passed into the inner room. Inside the cool stone walls, the quiet chatter of the participants changing into their uniforms stood in contrast to the hours of hymns and dancing accompanied by guitars and maracas that followed, all centered upon the Daime sacrament. Though the hymns spoke of familiar Catholic figures, the 'work', in which the participation of all is essential at every moment, contrasted sharply with the often less-than-engaging Catholic masses of my childhood. This contrast must have been prevalent for members of the church, as many came from Catholic backgrounds.

To discover a religion whose only doctrine is contained in these simple hymns, whose members dance back and forth, creating a spiral up to heaven with their movements must have been truly revolutionary. That the Santo

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Daime hold 'works', as opposed to masses or services, reflects this environment in which all actively - and often quite strenuously- participate, forging a collective connection with the divine through every note sung, every step danced.

While the Christian must accept the transubstantiation of the communion wafer on faith, the direct religious experience of these entheogenic users carries its own conviction, directly accessible to all who partake. The Santo Daime and other modern religious revivals - including Pentecostalism and eastern mystical movements- share Aldous Huxley's goal of providing individuals with the types of experiences that they could previously only read about in the mystic literature. Such mystical experiences of belonging forge active, participatory, experiential forms of religious existence that issue a powerful protest against modern alienation.

This embrace of direct experience in the face of alienation necessarily engenders conflict with those in power: ecstatic religious experience often runs counter to modern rational existence. This conflict certainly has a long and often disturbing history; the periodic DEA raids on Santo Daime 'works' are part of a much longer, more deeply ingrained struggle, going back to the devastating encounters between Spanish *conquistadores* and the indigenous peoples whose lands they invaded. The Spaniards deemed mushrooms "demonic holy communicants,"¹ and sys-

tematically repressed native religious use.

Mediation and Integration

We can see this conflict between modern rationality and ecstatic religious experience being played out ideologically and politically. Conflict within the political realm is much more prominent for those groups who use entheogens to achieve ecstatic religious states.

While political repression is perhaps the primary barrier to entheogenic use, it is certainly not the only one. Individuals exist within and are formed by modern society, so this struggle takes place not merely between religious participants and the government that opposes them. Indeed, this is a struggle being played out within small groups and individuals; we are simultaneously formed by modern rationality and seek to react against it, so we engage in this conflict with ourselves. More explicitly, we exist within this society which is, in some ways, at odds with these experiences, and must find ways to mediate between entheogenic experiences and life within the modern US; here, we are referring to the problem of integration.

My project addressed this problem of mediation and integration by examining the religious use of LSD in the 1960s, the entheogenic use of the Jívaro of Ecuador, and the religious ecstasy of Pentecostalism. I discussed some factors in the dissipation of the religious movement centered upon LSD and then attempted to illuminate them through discussions of the Jívaro and Pentecostalism. The Jívaro are useful to examine as a society into which entheogenic use is firmly integrated. They are successful in mediating between daily life and the entheogenic experience by forging connections between the two realms that embrace virtually all aspects of existence, from the most sacred to the most mundane. "One can hardly name any aspect of living or dying, wakefulness or sleep, where caapi hallucinations do not play a vital, nay, overwhelming role."²

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Like LSD users, Pentecostals were part of a group who embraced ecstatic religious experience marked by altered states of consciousness in the 20th Century US. Despite their initial conflicts with established power complexes, they ended up growing and thriving. I examined the means by which they were successful and the ways in which they mediated between both ecstatic experience and daily life, and between the religious group and society at large.

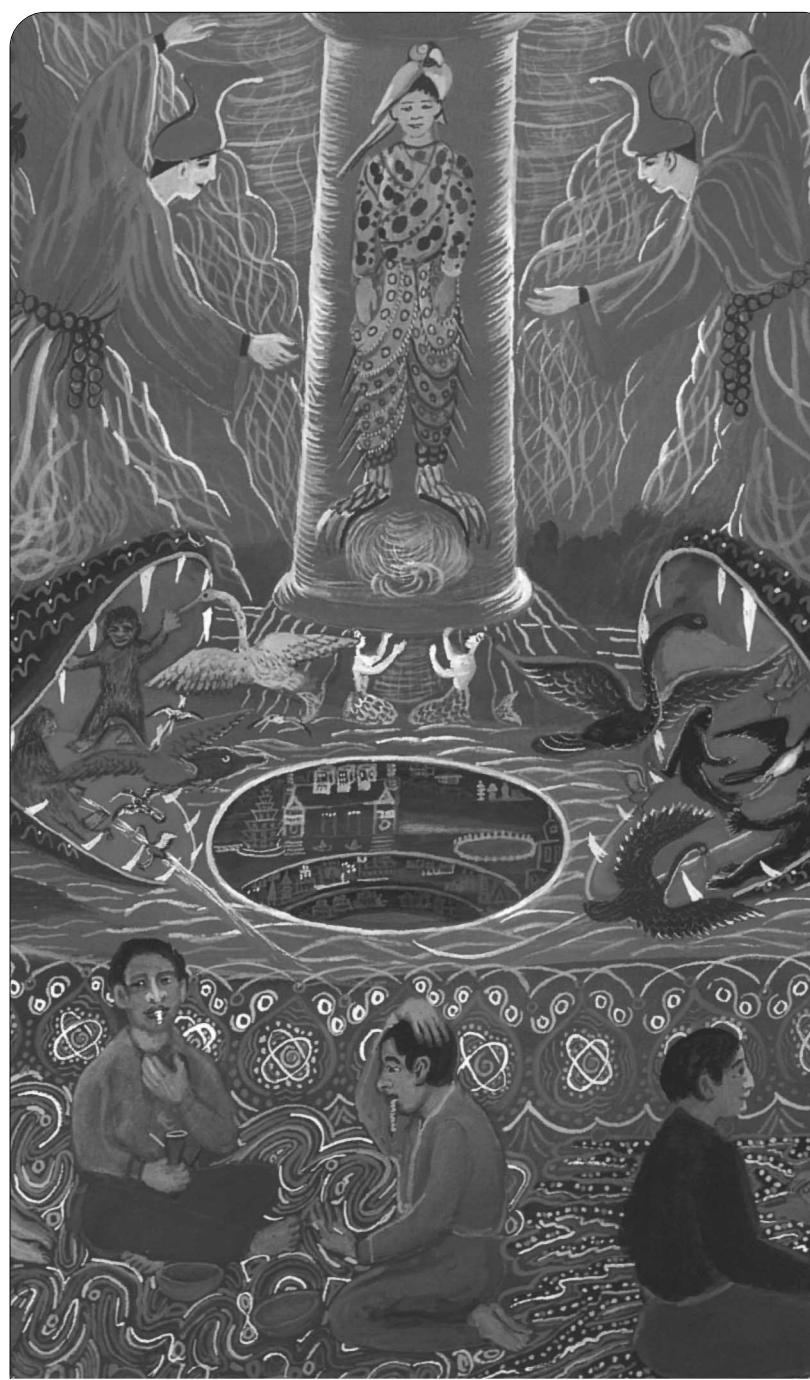
These three groups provide an opportunity to examine systems capable of bridging the chasms between the self and the religious group, the group and the world, inner experience and outer existence. While entheogenic use in the 1960s often exacerbated modern alienation, it is clear that this need not be the case and, through appropriate ritual, such use can provide an opportunity to integrate oneself into the social world, to achieve a more holistic and unified existence. This is precisely what Santo Daime members throughout the world seek to achieve. With this in mind, I analyzed some conditions - including practice and belief - that made such integration possible for these groups in the past, with an eye towards the contemporary religious use of entheogens. In the US this contemporary use is not limited to highly organized Christian groups such as the Santo Daime. The form that religious use takes depends upon the group involved; indeed, some have compared the ritual involved in raves to Native American peyote ceremonies, reflecting the myriad formal possibilities for contemporary entheogenic religious practice. The conditions that I analyzed allow for such diversity. I hope that by taking such conditions into account, contemporary entheogenic practitioners of all types will continue to forge socially integrative, personally fulfilling religious existences, guided by Huxley's utopian vision of an experience that would "abol-

ish our solitude as individuals, attune us with our fellows in a glowing exaltation of affection and make life in all its aspects seem not only worth living, but divinely beautiful and significant."³ ■

¹ Cited in John Marks, *The Manchurian Candidate*, Inner Traditions, 1991, p. 113.

² Schultes, RE, *Vine of the Soul: Medicine Men, Their Plants and Rituals in the Colombian Amazon*, Synergetic Press, 1992.

³ Horowitz, M, Palmer, C (Eds), *Moksha: Aldous Huxley's Classic Writings on Psychedelics and the Visionary Experience*, 1999, p. 9.



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Detail