

## Psychoactive Substances and Shamans: An Influential Pairing

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Ancient Mesoamericans were greatly diversified as to their religious ritual practices. The purposes for these rituals may have varied somewhat in content as well as toward whom they were being directed. Shamanism and its trademark trances maintained undeniable religious and cultural significance throughout the entirety of ancient Mesoamerica, and one of the most important ways in which the native religious practitioners could produce the trance that enabled them to transcend reality, visit the spirit world and even provide convincing recollections of their time there was through the utilization of organic psychotropic substances and various self-destructive actions. Through these practices, shamanism was able to manifest itself in such a way that it has become one of the many integral aspects of understanding Mesoamerican societies.

Many cultures appear to have used hallucinogenic plants and other organic substances to achieve the sought after euphoric state that allows them to communicate with their gods. In his observations of these religious ritual practices, Spanish missionary Bernardino De Sahagún described the effects of ingesting these potent hallucinogens, "...as being extremely maddening and disturbing" (Aguilar-Moreno 2006: 360). Perhaps, though, this is exactly what the shamans would want from one of their hallucinogenic substances. The more "maddening and disturbing" the effects of the psychoactive substance turned out to be, the deeper and more effectual the trance.

Before delving into a greater description of shamanistic rituals, perhaps it is necessary to provide a brief overview of who these religious practitioners were as individuals. To begin, it should be known that shamans belonged to the elite tier of society and were often linked with the divine. The spiritual powers of a shaman were thought to have been inherited from a deceased ancestor who had also possessed this same tie to the spirit world. When a supposed candidate began to exhibit possible signs of possessing shamanic gifts, "...they would become meditative and absent minded, seek solitude and often have seizures" (Eliade 1972: 35). All of these warning signs would occur before the potential shaman was actually communing with the spirit world in any way. To bring about the shaman's first "celestial journey" (Eliade 1972: 128), the individual became intoxicated through a combination of self-mutilation and consumption of natural narcotic substances (Markman 1989: 145). Once the shaman had created the "bridge" between reality and the spirit world using these methods, he then had the ability to commune with the spirits. Essentially, the shaman succeeded in, "...shedding his physical being in order to become pure spirit...so that all boundaries could be crossed, time and space could be transcended and the order of the cosmos revealed" (Markman 1989: 102). From here, the shaman was able to utilize this "out of body" method to preside over numerous other ritual ceremonies and, on behalf of a single person or entire community, serve as an intermediary between humans and divine spirits (Schaefer and Furst 1998: 19).

In addition to their roles in religious ceremonies, Shamans also often served as political and societal leaders that were key components of regional societies. Of course it would have been entirely possible for a non-elite, non-shaman individual to obtain the means to intoxicate themselves in order to induce a trance or stupor so that they could have visions. While this is so, any visions that this unqualified individual would have had would have only been seen as unreliable sources of information. This being said, the great amounts of trust that the ordinary Mesoamerican citizen had in regards to these

shamans proved that these border-line divine individuals, "...wielded immense power and importance...in the complex Mesoamerican societies" (VanPool 2003: 713) Although most shamans did have this large support system, normally they did not intentionally dominate or manipulate any other cultural arena (Eliade 1972: 4). The shaman tended to coexist and cooperate with the other political leaders and sacrificial priests with little difficulty, which was essential for maintaining an organized and sound society.

Throughout Mesoamerica, shamans ingested copious amounts of various organic hallucinogens, narcotics and neurotoxins in order to reach their desired trance-state. These substances include seeds from the cojóbana tree (cohoba) and numerous varieties of hallucinogenic fungi. In addition to this, there is evidence that cultures like the Mexica hunted for and made use of a widely growing small cactus called peyote. Peyote was an especially important component of the divinatory rituals of the Teochichimeca, who were the ancestors of the Mexica (Schaefer and Furst 1998:141). The Mesoamerican peoples also utilized various fauna in their quest for a deep trance. There is evidence of shamans licking the toxic skin secretions from poisonous toads, such as *Bufo marinus*, in order to achieve a brief stupor. Another concoction that has been found to be a potent psychoactive substance is referred to as *teotlacualli* (Markman 1989: 104). *Teotlacualli* is a mixture composed of tobacco, crushed scorpions, live spiders and centipedes that the shaman then smears all over his body or drinks. Interestingly, one of the most addictive and euphoric trance-state inducing narcotic substances used widely by modern day individuals was also used by Mesoamerican shamans. The scientific name of the plant is *Erythroxylon coca* and, in its refined form, is known as cocaine. Even though the ancient Mesoamerican shamans did not ingest the refined form, they did find that combining the leaves with powdered limestone and masticating the pair eventually released and amplified the potent neurotoxin that is already found within the juices of the leaves (Doweiko 2009: 131). This powerful combination provided a very long lasting euphoric state that the shamans could utilize during their ritual practices. Ultimately, though, tobacco has been found to be the most extensively used substance (Nieves-Rivera 2010: 130). This is not due to its potency, but to its expansive domain of cultivation as well as the wide variety of ways it can be prepared and ingested.

Extensiveness in the shamanic use of these substances depended upon the ease of attainment, overall availability and even its effectiveness. While a shaman may not have had any control over both availability and attainment of the substance, he did have control over its effectiveness in terms of potency. Although, the shaman could not completely alter the true chemical potency of the substances, he could amplify it through the way it was ingested. For instance, substances such as tobacco, cohoba, peyote and the hallucinogenic mushrooms were either smoked or eaten as they were. Other substances, like the *Bufo marinus* secretions, coca leaf juices and *teotlacualli* were usually absorbed into the body transdermally or sublingually. This means that the psychoactive toxins within the substances were taken up by the shaman's bloodstream directly and transported throughout the body via the circulatory system. Even though some of the substances that were utilized in this way were not as chemically potent as the substances ingested orally or through smoking, they in fact had the potential to be more powerful because they were not metabolized by the shaman's body as extensively. However, regardless of the method of ingestion or total potency of the substance, the fact remains that once any of these hallucinogens were consumed by the shaman they brought forth vivid "revelations" that enabled him to commune with the spirit world (Soustelle 1970: 194).

Overall, the entire structure of the shamanic-trance ritual did not

vary significantly, but the rituals could vary slightly in the specific details. For instance, the methods by which shaman-priests, and even select members of the civilian population in some cultures, purified and cleansed their bodies in preparation for the ritual, the hallucinogens they ingested to enter the trance-like state, as well as the way in which they ingested the hallucinogens are just several ways in which the rituals specificities diverged from one another. An example of a culture that also communes with the spirit world, but through slightly different methods, is the Pueblo from Southwest North America. Unlike the Pueblo, Mesoamerican shaman-priests, "... contacted the spirit world by directly traveling to it during ecstasy trances, not indirectly through smoke and prayers" (VanPool 2003: 700). In other words, the Mesoamerican shaman-priests interacted directly with the spirit world while other cultures, like the Pueblo, used more indirect methods of prayer to make contact. Another slight difference between the two cultures ritual methods is that every adult male was eligible to take part in the ritual chanting and prayer sessions that were held. This is unlike the Mesoamerican rituals in that it was only the shamans that underwent various forms of intoxication in order to make contact with the spirit world.

As the abovementioned states, it was very common for shamans in ancient Mesoamerica to consume a large variety of organic hallucinogenic substances to aide them in their religious ritual practices. Some scholars maintain that this practice came about simply because narcotic intoxication was the only way the shaman could produce a trance-state (Eliade 1972: 401). In fact, though, "...there is every reason to believe that the use of narcotics was encouraged..." in order to provide the shaman with the desired trance (Eliade 1972: 477). It seems very obvious that most shamans did not simply find themselves in trance-states during rituals without having somehow encouraged its occurrence. While this could be seen as a sign that shamans really were not legitimate religious practitioners, but in fact manipulative charlatans because they utilized the effects of the hallucinogenic substances instead of their own divine power, it seems more likely that the citizens witnessing these rituals did not view it in this way at all. As VanPool states in her article, "...the transition between the world of the mundane and the supernatural... is frequently facilitated by inducing trance-states using psychoactive plants" (698). It is highly probable that ancient Mesoamerican citizens saw the usage of these substances simply as a way to quicken the development of and amplify the shaman's own powers during religious rituals and not as a method of deceit.

Great cultural and religious significance has always been placed on the shaman's entrance into their trance-states. Not only was passing over into the spirit world to commune with supernatural beings and ancestors considered sacred, the act was highly meaningful to the society as a whole as well. While Mesoamerican shamans were concerned the most with the spiritual aspects of the religious rituals that they performed, they were still able to show that they were concerned about the well-being of the society they lived in as well (Eliade 1972: 183). Oftentimes, the sole reason for initiating the shamanic spirit world communication was in an attempt to retrieve any advice from the supernatural beings that may have been needed by the society. So, "...by being catapulted through a trance into a state of consciousness... the shaman could transcend his human limitation and gain insight into the cosmic order" (Markman 1989: 143). Not only would bringing back information derived from the gods help clarify any uncertainties Mesoamerican citizens may have had, it would also have allowed the shaman to remain true to the spirit world that he had so much respect for.

From this evidence, it is not difficult to see that the shamans did in fact take these religious practices exceedingly seriously. It really does

seem that these religious practitioners truly believed that, "...in the shamanic universe, the soul...is separable from the individual...and can become autonomous and function free of the body...," in such a way that the communication between reality and the spiritual realms becomes entirely possible (Markman 1998: 101-102). At this point, though, it is immaterial whether or not the shaman actually did travel between realms. What does matter is the fact that there were entire communities relying on whatever information the shaman did relay back. So if the shaman himself did not believe in the occurrence of an actual trance-state, one that was replete with visions, omens and free-floating essences, then there was no hope of him "returning" to convey any convincing information to the people awaiting him. If this occurred, it could be disastrous for the entire society.

The purpose for the trances according to the shaman and his devoted followers is something infinitely more profound than merely the psychedelic side-effects of the substances ingested. A shaman's trance-states were actually the way in which the shaman's soul would leave its earthly body and travel to the spirit world to commune with supernatural beings on behalf of the community. The hallucinogenic substances themselves were used as a means to facilitate the occurrence of a trance for the shaman. Even if a true trance-state experience is impossible, the stupor that resulted from the ingestion of the hallucinogenic substances helped both the shaman and the observing citizens to believe that it was in fact true. If it were not for the hallucinogenic substances, shamans may not have been able to provide a convincing recollection of their spirit world communications. As a result, faith in the entire ancient Mesoamerican religious system could have collapsed, resulting in horribly unstable or even non-existent societies.

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