

**THE SAN LUIS POTOSI CONFERENCE—
PLANTS, SHAMANISM AND STATES OF CONSCIOUSNESS:
HALLUCINOGENIC PLANTS AND THEIR CULTURAL CONTEXT**

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THE MYTHICAL CITY of the Mexican desert, San Luis Potosi, which in past decades was the starting point for thousands of "adventurers of the soul" on their pilgrimage in the "magical land of peyote" seeking existential answers - some more than others - or, more simply, new "highs", was the venue for a singular conference on the use of hallucinogenic plants and entheogenous (from the Greek *entheos*=God inside and *gen*=to become) substances in their cultural contexts, held from November 16-20, 1992. The Conference was organized by the Department of Visual Arts of the International University of Florida through the indefatigable and inexhaustible figure of Manuel Torres, and the Museo Regional Potosino, the directors of which could hardly believe the arrival of so many international scholars (an international conference had not been held in San Luis Potosi for almost thirty years) in a town that is normally off the beaten track of cultural events in Mexico. It is more famous for its industry and livestock breeding than for the wealth of its architecture, the legacy of an era when the rich mines of the area made it a highly prosperous colonial town. In the past few years, only one type of tourist had been seen in San Luis Potosi, as they passed through with the sole obsession of reaching Real de Catorce, a semi-abandoned decaying village, outside time, around which the *Lophophora williamsii*, the mescaline cactus, better known as peyote or mescal buttons, grows in abundance.

THE SUBJECTS of the conference had not been dealt with for fifteen years and so this meeting indeed represented a historic occasion. The last conference on hallucinogenic plants had been held in San Francisco in 1978, in the then capital of a cultural movement that seemed destined to change the world but which, in two or three years, was to break up into a thousand totally unconnected ramifications. The opportunity to meet in person the protagonists of that first conference in person thus became all the more significant: Shulgin, Furst and Ott; on the other hand, Mexican experts and scientists were conspicuous by their absence, with the exception of a few representatives of the Regional Museum of Potosi who were, moreover, rather removed from the context of the conference.

It was no coincidence that the plenary lecture was given by Alexander Shulgin, a highly creative figure, mid-way between the misunderstood scientist and the philosophical sage. Shulgin's research and personal experimentation for over thirty years with phenethylamines (mescaline, MDMA, etc.) have given him a charisma that goes well beyond the purely technical limits of scientific research. He gave a long informal lecture which more than anything else was aimed at defending the use of hallucinogenic substances, after all due consideration and for a specific purpose, as a means of interior investigation into the most hidden and surprising aspects of the human mind. His analysis of the United States' policy in the field of "drugs" was particularly perspicacious. He pointed out that, by virtue of a de-

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liberate legislative ambiguity, the police force, that is the body that ought to guarantee the application of the law, in fact becomes the party that interprets the law, thus effectively acting in place of the juridical body. We feel that the same situation is being recreated in Italy, with a coercive law that in fact defines nothing at all.

In the afternoon, Bradley Lenz explored the theories of Emboden on a possible initiatory role of Mandrake in ancient Egypt and a Chilean scholar of ethnomusicology, Jose Perez de Arce, tried to establish a connection between the archaeological finds of the desert of Atacama in Chile, and perhaps related to the use of *vilca*, *Adenanthera columbrina*, and the modern folklore rituals of central Chile in a totally different geographical and cultural context.

The next day, Peter Furst fascinated the audience with a learned disquisition on the role of *Kieri*, a Solanaceae that has not yet been well identified, the use of which amongst the Huichols of Mexico has been underestimated so far. The famous U.S. anthropologist outlined the existence, in this ethnic group, of two initiatory lives; one involving the use of *Lophophora williamsii* or *peyote*, with at least five pilgrimages to Wirikuta, the desert where it grows, in the vicinity of San Luis Potosi, nearly 400 miles from the area where they live and the other based on a personal and individual relationship with *Kieri*, which grows in the subtropical areas of the Sierra Huichol. Whilst the former is a collective and socially recognized shamanism, the latter would appear to be a more individual method, less publicly shared. Two possible identifications are put forward: on the one hand *Datura*, in its metel or inoxia variety, and in favour of this interpretation there is the evidence of some symptoms of intoxication, whilst on the other hand *Solandra*, in its *guerrensis* and *brevialix* varieties. After having sustained the second hypothesis for years, Furst tends today to re-propose the dilemma which he will discuss in greater depth in a future paper.

Equally exhilarating was the second presentation by Stacy Schaefer of the University of Texas who analysed the cult of the mescal button with Huichols.

Basing her study on over 18 years of ethnographical work, for the first time she outlined a description of the indigenous taxonomy of the peyote cactus, defining the various types on the basis of the morphology, color, flower and group growth. The author then analysed the stages of mescaline intoxication provoked by ingestion of the cactus, paying particular attention to the relationship between phosphenes (geometrical images of the first stage of mescaline intoxication and otherwise) and the artistic patterns of local handicrafts, as she herself has been initiated into a female Huichol society through which this knowledge is handed down. Schaefer and Furst are working at present on a volume which will collect contributions by various specialists on Huichol shamanism (*People of Peyote*, Univ. of Texas, in press).

THE AFTERNOON of the second day saw three Italian scholars as presenters: Mario Polia, Antonio Bianchi and Giorgio Samorini. Polia spoke of his own research, which has been ongoing for 19 years amongst the Curanderos of northern Peru on the use of the *Cactus San Pedro* (*Trichocereus pachanoi*) in initiation and therapeutic rituals. Particularly significant was the archaeological iconography he showed that highlighted a continuity of use going back to pre-Inca civilizations. Bianchi presented an ethnobotanical study on the use of *Brugmasie* in the same cultural context and their provisional identification as data is collected, despite the secrecy that surrounds the ingestion of these plants. It is of note to recall how in this geographical area, compared by many authors to the peyote area in Mexico (both cacti contain mescaline), the same ambivalence is recreated within a collective shamanism focalized on the use of the mescaline cactus and a parallel individual shamanism based on the ingestion of Solanaceae (*Solandra*, *Datura* or *Brugmasie*).

At the end of the second day, Samorini presented a paper on the fascinating subject of the little-known (outside specialist literature) African syncretist cult of the Bwiti in Gabon, based on the use of the *Tabernathe iboga*. This cult is gradually becoming more widespread, and is

present today in Zaire, Cameroun, and Equatorial Guinea. The paper contained numerous points of interest as it was about one of the few traditional uses of hallucinogenic plants known in Africa and is especially a vital religious movement in continuous expansion. The approach of the speaker "from the inside" was also remarkable, in comparison with many other papers where the detachment of the scholar was all too obvious.

The next day began with the excellent presentation by Jonathan Ott, the well-known American scientist who now lives in Mexico, on a botanical, chemical and pharmacological analysis of the South American hallucinogenic drink known under the name of Ayahuasca or Yage and on the possibility of recreating its effects with plants from a temperate environments.

AFTER AN ANALYSIS of the scientific literature that has been published to date, in order to highlight the inhibitory effects of the B-carbolyinic alkaloids contained in the basic plant of the potion, Banisteriopsis caapi, on MAO (monoamine oxidase) enzymes and consequently of the activation of DMT (dimethyltryptamine) contained in numerous added plants (otherwise inactivated precisely by the MAO enzymes when administered orally), the Author presented the results of 17 experiments he had carried out on himself.

Three of these experiments were with "authentic" ayahuasca, prepared by Quichua ayahuasqueros of the Rio Napo, Ecuador with or without added plants rich in DMT. Fourteen of the experiments were carried out with "capsules of ayahuasca" (mixtures of harmina crystals and purified DMT) and "analogous ayahuasca" prepared with mixtures of plants from temperate zones that contained B-carbolines and DMT. The purpose of the experiments were to identify first of all the threshold dose for a visionary effect (about 0.25 - 0.5 mg/kg of DMT in the presence of 1.5 mg/kg of harmina) and consequently the possibility of producing drinks of the "ayahuasca" type with plants of the temperate zone (Peganum harmala and Desmanthus illinoensis in the experiment carried out by the Author). J. Ott is

collecting these and other data in a large volume on hallucinogenic plants available in a numbered edition (Jonathan Ott, P.O. Box 1251, Occidental, CA, 95465).

Dennis McKenna subsequently gave a brilliant presentation offering a panorama of the lesser known hallucinogenic plants, including one that came as a real novelty: a Mint from Turkmenistan, Longophilus inebrians, known in the past for its ritual use and today proposed for its sedative-hypnotic action in Russian pharmacopoeia.

The next afternoon was wholly devoted to papers by Chilean scientists who had worked on archaeological finds from the desert of Atacama, in relation to the use of Adenathera columbrina or other inhaled hallucinogenics. Some papers were perhaps excessively technical, but amongst these mention must be made of the paper presented by Manuel Torres, for the clarity for his exposition, and he is to be given the credit for having organized the symposium.

The presentations of two other key figures of the conference must also be mentioned: Luis Eduardo Luna and Josep Fericgla. Luis Luna again discussed his experience as assistant to Pablo Amaringo, an ex-ayahuasquero who has founded a school of painting in Pucallpa, Peru, where the themes of the paintings are directly inspired by the experience of the Ayahuasca. We met Luna about five years ago in Zagreb, when he began this type of work and we have to admit that at the time he did not convince us. Today we heard about an experience of life, rather than of study, which has grown beyond every reasonable expectation: the school, directed by Pablo Amaringo, has more than six hundred pupils from different ethnic groups of the region and has centers in Pucallpa, Iquitos and Leticia, showing an extraordinary capability of creating networks and relationships. And alongside the artistic activities, experiences linked to the creation of botanical gardens and the cultivation of medicinal plants are coming into being, becoming a permanent workshop of global education on the world of the forest, unique in the Third World. (For contacts: Kathleen Harrison, Botanical Dimensions, P.O. Box 807, Occidental, CA 95465). →

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This is also reflected in the artistic production, where the paintings by Pablo Amaringo have been replaced by those of his pupils with themes increasingly linked to the magic world of plants and the forest... There can be no doubt that this was the most fascinating paper of the whole conference!

The paper by Josep Fericgla is also to be mentioned. After a brief experience amongst the Shuar of Ecuador, Fericgla put forward the term of cultural adaptogenes for hallucinogens like ayahuasca, San Pedro and Peyote, namely plants that still have a central roles in their cultures, borrowing the expression from phyto-therapeutic terminology, where this term generally indicates plants such as Ginseng or Eleuterococcus, devoid of any specific action but which have an activity that increases the individual's performances of adaptation to the environment. These hallucinogenic plants could have the function of allowing the individual belonging to shamanic cultures to have access to unconventional perceptive channels in such a way as to foster adaptation to the spiritual presuppositions that such visions of the cosmos entail. Obviously, this function would be carried out only in those cultural contexts that approve of such experiences as qualitatively superior to those of the everyday world.

IN OUR CULTURE these would be "disadaptogenes", as the negation of certain spiritual values would lead to their identification as being pathological or deviant. This will certainly be discussed in the immediate future because Fericgla has the task of organizing the second edition of the conference which will be held in Barcelona, as an ideal bridge between Europe and America, in October of 1994. Anyone interested in receiving information on the next conference in Spain can contact Joseph Fericgla directly at the following address: Av. Gran Via Corts Catalanes, 457, 4 rt 10, 08015 Barcelona, or contact Dr. Stacy Schaefer, Dept. of Psychology and Anthropology, U. of Texas-Pan American, Edinburg, Texas, 78539.

The proceedings of the San Luis Potosi conference will be available in English in a special issue (vol. 5 and 6) of the German magazine *Integration*: write to Hermann DeVries, Eschenau #29, 8729 Knetzgau, Germany.

Italian Society for the Study of States of Consciousness

In December, 1990, in Rovereto (Trento, Italy), the Italian Society for the Study of States of Consciousness was established. The society promotes, encourages and facilitates the study of states of consciousness, with a particular stress on the means, chemical or not, suitable for the therapeutic and experimental modification of these states. The Society contains a nucleus of researchers interested in psychotropic plants from an interdisciplinary approach (botany, chemistry, pharmacology, psychopharmacology, and so on). The Society promotes cultural exchanges between scientific communities working on these issues at the international, national and local level.

The address of the Society is SISSC, Museo Civico di Rovereto, Via Calcinari 18, 38068 Rovereto (Trento), Italy. Membership is \$50 for individuals (please send brief curriculum vitae), \$90 for institutions. Members receive a bulletin several times a year, access to a data base, and more. ■