

1997 **Botanical Preservation Corps** Seminar on Ethnobotany and Chemistry of Psychoactive Plants

Kate Chapman

THE 1997 BOTANICAL PRESERVATION CORPS seminar on psychoactive plants and mushrooms, the eighth annual meeting, featured a fascinating, eclectic assortment of psychonauts and experts in the field. Lecturers included: Jonathan Ott, Deborah Mash, Alexander and Ann Shulgin, Brett Blosser, Manuel Torres, Ken Symington, Rob Montgomery, Christian Rätsch, and Terence McKenna.

Two identical seminars were held (January 11-17 & 20-26), each limited to the intimate size of 100, in the lush, rainforested area of southern Mexico, near the Mayan pyramids of Palenque, Chiapas. There was plenty of quality time the group spent together, time for the speakers to go into detail with their subject matter over the week, and time for everyone to ask questions and open discussions on critical points of debate. The bright days and the sounds of the crickets, birds and howler monkeys of the night offered a lively place to stretch one's mind and imagination.

Jonathan Ott

This man strikes me as a virtual psychedelic, oops!, I mean, *entheogenic* encyclopedia. (Ott prefers the word "entheogen," from "entheos," the divine within, over "psychedelic"). His views on how language affects the connotation of certain drugs and on how these drugs were historically introduced to Western culture unearthed the roots of many pharmacological misunderstandings that exist in our society. His historical accounts reevaluated our culture to understand how these substances have been sanctioned and profaned, held sacred and held under scrutiny.

His first lecture included material from the first chapter, "Pharmacophilia," from his forthcoming book, *The Natural Paradise*. He gave a detailed criticism on the impact of the book, *The Artificial Paradise*, written by the mid-19th century French author Baudelaire. He attacked

Baudelaire's use of the word "artificial" in reference to the intake of inebriants and called it a natural paradise instead for two reasons: (1) inebriation is a diverse phenomenon across various animal species ("zoopharmacognacy"), (2) there is neurochemical evidence that many of the entheogens are molecularly similar to (if not the same as, such as the case with DMT) endogenous compounds found in the brain. He then went on to discuss more of the historical literature on psychedelic compounds and their cultural implications, such as the belief in certain religious dogmas that equate pleasure with sin.

Entheomycology

His second lecture was on entheomycology, or the study of entheogenic mushrooms. Having done some collaboration with R. Gordon Wasson, he knew much on the rediscovery of these curious fungi. One notable piece of evidence presented of early Mayan use of entheogens (which most likely included mushrooms) was of the ancient images of the disembodied eye drop trees and flowers, or

For additional information about future seminars, The Botanical Preservation Corps can be reached at (818) 355-9585. Kate Chapman can be reached at chapman@virtu.sar.usf.edu.

vision-breeding plants covered with eyes.

Overall, Ott was filled with facts and offered many of his own theories, constructing and deconstructing terminology.

Brett Blosser

Brett Blosser, ethnobotanist and anthropologist, gave lectures with guided tours of the Mayan ruins and the surrounding rainforests. It was a very valuable experience hiking up and down Mayan pyramids, such as the smoking god's temple, with noteworthy psychonauts and unearthing ancient mysteries of a culture that used psychedelic plants sacramentally. On his tour of the rainforest surrounding the ruins, we



Brett Blosser collecting DMT-containing plants in the rainforest

learned much about the thriving ecology and the wide variety of plants, some of which he identified, that contain high percentages of DMT. We came to understand, as Alexander Shulgin likes to point out, DMT is everywhere.

Unfortunately, I missed his final talk, which was entitled "*Salvia divinorum* in Mazatec Shamanism."

Rob Montgomery

Rob Montgomery is the founder of the Botanical Preservation Corps, which was responsible for making the event happen. He co-lectured with Brett Blosser on the rainforest walk and identified many tryptamine-containing plants. He appeared to be quite a knowledgeable psychedelic botanist; we learned of psychoactive plant preparations used by indigenous cultures of South America, with the

visual aids of plant specimens that Rob had collected in the Amazon and other areas of Latin America. His specimens were displayed for the remainder of the seminar for identification.

Terence McKenna

Terence is a fascinating story teller, philosopher and historian. His psychedelic-inspired lectures gave reports from the "Other Side," including his notion that alien sightings are products of the human psyche, like the alien-like entities that he has encountered with the use of DMT. His discussion on "Plants, People and Otherness" defined God as being wholly, totally the "Other" and suggested that psychedelic plants, such as *Salvia divinorum*, connect the one who ingests them with the force of the Other. From this, one might infer that McKenna's affinity toward psychedelics is on the level of religious sacrament. In that lecture, he went on to discuss in detail a nonlocality theory that goes beyond the regular forces of Newtonian physics.

His two subsequent lectures were entitled "Chemical Perspectives on Evolution" and "Mind and the Future." His assertion that there has been a coevolution with humans and psychedelics is based on the idea that there has been a development of receptors (and possibly a further distribution of existing ones) in response to the intake of mind-altering plant alkaloids. He also suggested that when early man moved into the grasslands, the successful ones benefited from ingesting psilocybin, since it may have had aphrodisiacal qualities (promoting outbreeding), and small doses increase visual acuity. I didn't catch what evolution he thought the psychedelics plants and mushrooms were going through in response to humans, but I inferred that he meant that there might be some type of symbiotic relationship, where the higher quality psychedelic strains of plants were farmed, protected, and selected for. In his final lecture, he discussed psychedelics as molecular technology ("nanotechnological machines") that may aid in synchronizing homeostatic circadian rhythms with periodicities in atomic structures, periodicities which are the basis for the passing of time. And, of course, this diverged into his timewave theory, the chaotic order of time and history. Everyone there enjoyed Terence, donned in his "Strange Attractor" shirt, and listened avidly to his theoretical tangents. His personality precisely fits what he quoted from Hunter S. Thompson: "When the going gets weird, the weird turn pro."

Christian Rättsch

Christian gave two lectures on psychoactive drinks. The first included colorful personal accounts of having lived with the Lacandón Mayans near Palenque and sharing in their *balché* potion ceremonies. *Balché* induces subjective feelings of bonding and togetherness, much like what is said to be produced during group MDMA sessions. The process of drinking usually lasts all day, since a large quantity must be consumed for any effect to take place. His second lecture was on psychoactive beers and meads used in Germany and other places in Europe before the spread of Roman Catholicism. It was a bit of history and folklore of which many people are unaware. In old Europe, beers and meads were often made with herbal additives, such as hallucinogenic mushrooms, mandrake, cannabis, and henbane; the alcohol served primarily as a preservative and was secondary for inebriating effects. Many of the old gods and goddesses were associated with psychoactive herbs, mushrooms, and the beers that were made with them; they also represented inspiration, blissful love, fertility, and connection. Remnants of the annual spring fertility holiday of those days can be found in the current Christian holiday, Easter; these remnants include eggs and bunnies, both of which have more to do with fertility than to do with Christ. He mentioned that the sexual rites of this pre-Christian holiday (carried out with town orgies) often included the use of cannabis and *Amanita muscaria* (which begins to grow in an egg shape and turns phallic). Of course, the church changed the practices of how the beers were brewed in their suppression of Pagan culture and herbal knowledge; aphrodisiac cannabis was replaced with hops that suppress male virility (through increased estrogen production), and the men took over the women's traditional role of brewing while women with herbal knowledge were condemned as witches. In the end, Christian gave us a good recipe for henbane beer to brew at home.

Alexander Shulgin

Best known for his heroic book, *PIHKAL*, which is about various phenethylamines he has worked with and discovered, Alexander (Sasha) Shulgin is a true alchemical wizard, full of wit and charm. With much hand-waving, gestures like a conductor's, and rapid excitement in his speech, Sasha made organic chemistry comprehensible and entertaining to the layperson.

In his first talk, Shulgin went over structure-activity relationships of phenethylamines, a family of molecules to which the compounds MDMA, MDA, MDE and 2-CB belong. He gave a basic overview of organic chemistry with excellent clarity to discuss the activity differences of members of the phenethylamine family and made note of how the slightest molecular change could produce a drastically different psychoactive experience.

He discussed more about chemical relationships in his second talk, about tryptamines, and gave us a preview of a chapter in his forthcoming book, *TIHKAL (Tryptamines I Have Known And Loved, sequel to PIHKAL)*, called "DMT is Everywhere." He suggested that since DMT is found not only in seaweed, flowers, lawn grass, etc., but also in our brains and spinal columns, we are all Schedule I. He went on to discuss the different permutations of the tryptamine molecules and their different physiological effects. He also spoke a bit about the legal clauses of the Analog Drug Act, and how it is a very vague, fuzzy law. Dipropyl tryptamine (DPT), for example, is a somewhat legal compound that narrowly escaped the analog law, by virtue of not being an analog of biological activity to DMT, although they are chemically related. Another reason he suggested why it may still exist without scrutiny is that it is used by a church based in New York, the Church of the True Inner Light, and the DEA might not wish to publicly acknowledge the religious use of a psychedelic.

Overall, Sasha is a true scientist with a maddening curiosity that drives his critical analysis and experimentation into new frontiers. The man can rip through information like a tsunami.

Ann Shulgin

Ann, coauthor of *PIHKAL*, gave a passionate account, entitled "Transforming the Monster." She talked about the use of MDMA as a tool to face the dark side of inner problems (which she calls "monsters"). In her story, a "demonically possessed" woman was emotionally, mentally, and spiritually healed with an MDMA psychotherapy session. The patient addressed the demon as a hurt child, mothering and nourishing it. This is what Ann calls "shadow work." We came to understand what a great aid MDMA can be for psychological healing.



Ann and Sasha Shulgin

Constantino Manuel Torres

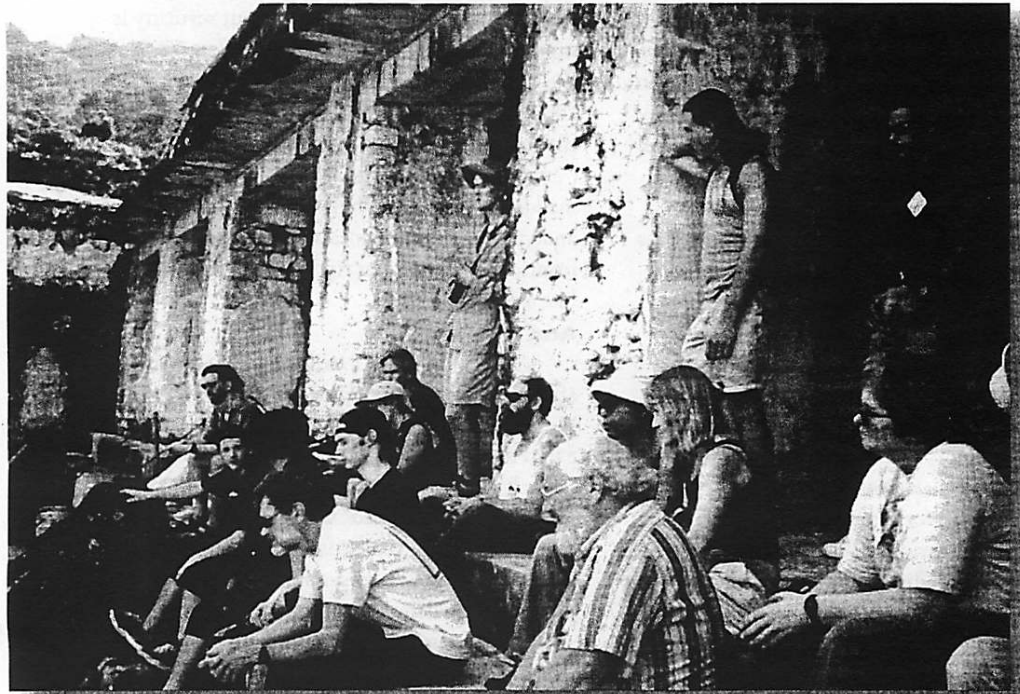
Torres' lectures were about psychoactive plants in Pre-Colombian South America and psychoactive snuffs. His archeological accounts of Pre-Colombian South American Indians using psychoactive plants gave us an understanding of the cultural importance and centrality the preparations of these plants had in their lives. The slide presentation highlighted the ethnographic distributions of snuff and ayahuasca use and artifacts that alluded to the use of psychoactive compounds in Pre-Colombian times. These items included an array of various snuff kits, with trays, tools, finely woven pouches, and other objects discussed in his book, *The Iconography of South American Snuff Trays and Related Paraphernalia*. He also spoke quite a bit about the preparation and admixtures used in a common snuff, *Virola*, and his recent discoveries of tryptamines found in 1,200 year-old samples of *Anadenanthera* snuffs. Unfortunately, much of the indigenous use of psychoactive plants ended with the Spanish Catholic settlement's war on drug use; their decrees and destruction of paraphernalia uprooted much of the native culture.

Deborah Mash

For several years, Dr. Mash has been researching the physiological and neurological effects of ibogaine, a psychedelic anecdotally

reported to have great efficacy in curing cocaine and heroin addictions. She is trying to clinically prove its anti-addictive properties. MAPS donated \$25,000 to this effort in 1996 (see MAPS Vol. VI No. 3).

Her excellent historical account of the religious use of *iboga* (the plant from which ibogaine is derived) in indigenous cultures set the stage for the story of ibogaine use in the western world. Notable figures and events in the use and research of the drug were discussed, such as Howard Lotsof's offshore treatment programs and George Molliver's research findings. She addressed and criticized Molliver's theory that recreational and therapeutic doses of ibogaine cause cerebellar damage, an idea that may not be true (she found the methods used in his study to be questionable). In fact, she said she was able to obtain the brain of a woman who died of natural causes and who had taken ibogaine within days before her death, and she found no signs of damage to the cerebellum. Dr. Mash's research is critical for the evaluation of this unique compound as a very effective tool in overcoming addiction; it has the potential for saving many lives. There was an emphasis on what paradigm shifts ibogaine might bring to the legal system and to the medical community, financially (having a better cost-benefit ratio) and socially (people might changed their



Group of seminar attendees at the Mayan ruins, absorbing information about archaeological evidence of ancient psychoactive plant use (Terence McKenna in foreground).

generalizations about psychedelics and see that every compound is unique in its medical benefits and risks). Everyone at the seminar applauded Dr. Mash for her steadfast crusade.

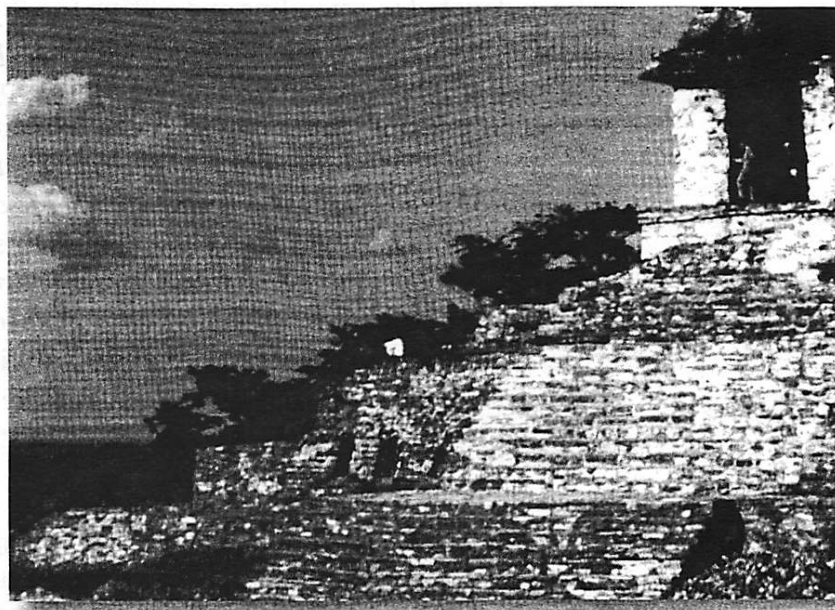
Ken Symington

Ken is the BPC registrar and one of the organizers of the seminar. Having studied ayahuasca in the Amazon with mestizo and native healers for many years, he was able to convey some of the teachings of the vine in his session of poetry and mystery of ayahuasca. We gathered out by the poolside for his talk, where lovely incense and candles burned. He drew relationships between the outer and the inner worlds and discussed the group energy balances that are experienced in an ayahuasca ceremony. Dietary and health restrictions for partaking in the ceremony were also covered, and he answered any questions we had. He truly brought back some of the magic he has encountered in the ceremonies of the Amazon.

Summary

Overall, the seminar was highly informative and covered many aspects of the study of psychoactive plants. I would strongly recommend attending the BPC seminars in the future for those who wish to gain expert opinions from qualified researchers in the field. For a couple of years, there have been scholarships awarded for attending their meetings, for those who aren't

able to cover all of their expenses (so, if you are in need of a scholarship to attend in the future, it's best to register early). It was quite a treat to be informed of the history, anthropology, chemistry, neuroscience, botany, psychology, and philosophy of psychoactive plants in the lush setting of Palenque, just down the road from rainforests and Mayan pyramids. •



The Smoking God's Temple at the Mayan ruins of Palenque, Chiapas, Mexico

Next Entheogen-related Conference:

The 17th Annual Telluride Mushroom Festival • August 21-24, 1997

Contact: Fungophile, P.O. Box 480503, Denver, CO 80248-0503,
phone: (303) 296-9359

Speakers at this year's conference: John Corbin, Gary Lincoff, Linnea Gillman,
Christian Rätsch, Emanuel Salzman, Paul Stamets, Andrew Weil

1998 Entheobotany Shamanic Plant Seminars

January 24-30 & February 2-8, 1998

One week intensive seminar on archaic art and archaeology of Ambrosia, ethnomycology, South American visionary snuffs and ayahuasca, tryptamines, phenethylamines and allied alkaloids, Soma, Kykeon, collection, cultivation and preparation of psychoactive plants, etc.

Held near the Mayan ruins of Uxmál, 70 km. south of Merida, Yucatan, Mexico.

A \$1300 registration fee covers tuition, hotel (double occupancy) and meals for the week. Contact: Entheobotany Seminars,
P.O. Box 4, Sierra Madre, CA 91025, (818) 355-9585.