

Psychoactivity: a Multidisciplinary Conference on Plants, Shamanism & States of Consciousness

Carla Higdon
MAPS Projects Coordinator

and twin staircases leading up to a spacious auditorium with ornately carved wooden trusses, stone statues, and giant chandeliers. It was a befitting and decorous site for an event that featured some of the most prominent psychedelic researchers and visionaries of our time: Psychoactivity 1998.

The conference began on Thursday October 4 with an introduction from the organizers: Claudia Müller-Ebeling, Arno Adelaars, and Hans van den Hurk (founder of Amsterdam smart shop "Conscious Dreams"). Simon Vinkenoog, an active figure in the psychedelic community of Amsterdam since the 1970s and co-editor of the magazine *Pan Forum*, began the day's session with an animated reading of his own "Psychoactive Poem."

Psychedelics in Europe

The first presenter, Antonio Escohotado, author of the three volume *General History of Drugs*, spoke about the role of psychoactive agents in shaping prevalent social trends throughout the history of Western civilization. He began with the ancient times of the Eleusinian mysteries when people took psychoactive agents as a joyful sacrament, then moved on to the advent of Christianity when the gods of old like Bacchus, Pan, and Dionysus and the earthly pleasures they represented became synonymous with Satan and Satanic practice. He discussed how the moralization of drug use in the U.S. has steadily escalated, from the times of Alcohol Prohibition to the current War on Drugs.

After a short break, Peter Cohen and Mario Lapp from the Netherlands, and Patricia Ochsner from Switzerland held a panel discussion about the future of European drug policy. Some of the topics were: how the treatment of addiction varies from one European country to another, heroin maintenance vs. methadone treatment, decriminalization of cannabis, and innovative harm reduction measures such as the availability of a chromatograph to test the purity of MDMA at raves.

The Royal Tropical Institute of Amsterdam is a stately building, with a grand marble entrance hall

Dr. Dick Bierman of the University of Utrecht followed with a fascinating account of a study that explored clairvoyance in test subjects under the influence of psilocybin mushrooms. In a free response test called the Ganzfeld Procedure, participants were asked to wear sensory deprivation goggles and "white noise" producing devices while the "sender" looked at random images through a view master. To succeed, test subjects had to correctly guess one out of three images. Some of the images were positive in nature while others were negative. Thirty-two percent were successful, but Bierman concluded that subjects scored much higher when identifying positive images and apparently suppressed the material that was more negative in nature.

Hans van den Hurk ended Thursday's session with an informative talk of his personal vision of, "bringing psychoactivity to the people" with the 1993 inception of Conscious Dreams, Amsterdam's first smart shop. The store has been a huge success; it carries a variety of herbs, vitamins, and legal psychoactive drugs. The management encourages responsible use and hopes to minimize risks by providing harm reduc-

tion information along with each product. There are currently approximately forty smart shops in Amsterdam.

Visionary Plants

The first of Friday morning's presenters was Christian Rättsch, who gave a talk entitled, "Psychoactivity: the Fountain of Culture." Stacy Schaefer gave a presentation about the Huichol Indians, their peyote-inspired artwork and Mexican drug laws. Claus Deimel discussed peyote scraping. Following a short break Benny Shanon summarized the findings from his MAPS-funded study (see *MAPS Bulletin* Vol. VIII No. 3, Autumn 1998) on the commonalities of ayahuasca visions experienced by people of vastly different cultures and socioeconomic backgrounds.

After lunch, Jonathan Ott delivered a detailed lecture and slide show on *jurema preta* and other ayahuasca analogues with his usual casual and scholarly charm.

Jurema preta, also known as *Mimosa hostilis*, is, according to Ott, orally active without the customary MAO inhibitor of *Peganum harmala* seeds. His presentation was peppered with humorous confessions of his own personal affinity for DMT. For some this would have been a tough act to follow but the next presenter proved up for the task.

Dressed like he was from the salon of some Oxford don, Ralph Cosack entertained us all with his eccentric blend of wit and old fashioned formality. He gave an authoritative discussion on the mysterious sleep-producing effects of *Amanita muscaria* and how to most effectively prepare this mushroom for ingestion. He somewhat reluctantly admitted in the end to having arrived at these conclusions after many years of personal bioassay.

Giorgio Samorini was up next with the tale of his iboga initiation with the Buiti tribe of Gabon, Africa. The Buiti practice a syncretic religion that combines aspects of Christianity with more traditional ancestor worship. They use iboga as a sacrament and ingest amounts that are large enough, according to the paradigm of western

medicine, to kill several people. Samorini documented his initiation ceremony on slides, and recalls it as being, "very hard and very dramatic," where he, "faced death issues for a long time." He ate eight hundred grams of the root bark (psychedelic effects start at 7 to 10 grams).

Paul Stamets concluded Friday's events with a slide show of the beautifully rugged and mushroom-laden terrain of the Olympic Peninsula of Washington state and a crash course in the fundamentals of mycology. Stamets suggested that there is an ultimate design to the interface of mushrooms with human culture and to the mycelial networks that run through the earth's soil. He brought up the amusing fact that we are all unwitting participants in the profligation of mushrooms as their spores hitch rides on us while we travel throughout the world.

A Surprise Guest

The day came to a close and hints were dropped about a special mystery guest scheduled to appear first thing the following morning. We left with the certainty that we would all be getting up early.

To our delight, the guest turned out to be the venerable Dr. Albert Hofmann. He began Saturday's session with an engaging account of his accidental but legendary discovery of LSD, which he claims "found him." He gave a poignant reading from some of his earlier musings, poetically referring to Earth as our "floating blue planet, where the dramas of man are acted out." He suggested that we, as humans, might be humbled by our small place in the infinite universe and added that we could learn from children who are in his opinion "born philosophers who see the world as it really is." Of course, we were all overjoyed by Dr. Hofmann's unexpected appearance and honored him with a standing ovation.

Psychedelic Therapy

The application of psychoactive substances in psychotherapy was the theme for the remainder of the morning. Ralph Metzner elaborated on the dichotomy between the healing models of allopathic

medicine and those of shamanic practices and described the four categories of human psychedelic experience. After Metzner, Ann Shulgin spoke about the therapeutic techniques used by "Adam Fisher," her pseudonym for the renowned psychedelic therapist Myron Stolaroff refers to as "Jacob" in his book *The Secret Chief*.

Ann was followed by Richard Yensen and Donna Dryer who described the effectiveness of LSD as an adjunct to psychotherapy in the treatment of alcoholism. At The Maryland Psychiatric Research Center where some of this pioneering work was first carried out, one third of the patient population maintained sobriety for eighteen months after just one high dose session. Donna recounted the famous case history of Art King. In a 1965 nationally televised LSD therapy session, King confronted painful emotional issues and with the support of his wife, successfully overcame years of debilitating alcoholism. (In 1994, the television program *48 Hours* showed a follow-up interview with King, who remains sober today.)

After a short coffee break, three German physicians, Michael Szukaj, Thomas Heinz, and Michael Schlichting, reviewed their protocol for a proposed psilocybin "self study" designed to introduce twenty-four doctors to the effects of the drug by direct experience. It is their hope that such a study would lend credibility to the psychedelic experience within the community of medical professionals as well as fulfill a required prerequisite for future therapeutic studies in Germany. MAPS has pledged \$7,000 to this study, pending the necessary approvals required from German governmental agencies.

Psychedelic Art

Following lunch, Manuel Torres began the afternoon discussions about the influence of psychoactivity in art. He discussed Tiwanaku iconography in the snuffing paraphernalia of the South Central Andes. Peter de Smet talked about the use of psychoactive agents in traditional African cultures and the occurrence of these agents in the art of European countries, and Claudia Müller-Ebeling continued on this theme with a presentation entitled: "Mandragera in European Art."

Alex Grey concluded the day with a comprehensive slide documentary of his

career as an artist. He covered the time period when he worked in a morgue and developed his fascination with the anatomy of the human body. He also explored the controversial themes of some of his earlier performance art and talked about how his practice of Buddhism and his psychedelic experiences have been a source of creative inspiration. Grey gave us a sneak preview of works of art which will be in his upcoming new book, a follow-up to the 1990 book *Sacred Mirrors*.

At the Milky Way

That night, in the true spirit of psychedelical revelry, conference goers and presenters alike experimented with inspired forms of socializing, flirting, and dancing at a "Time Machine Party" at The Melkweg (Milky Way), a seven room party environment in the heart of Amsterdam. Despite his 92 years, Albert Hofmann impressed everyone with his skills on the dance floor. He was last spotted around 3:00 a.m. still going at it with an energetic young partner less than a third his age. The dancing went on till dawn and many new friendships were forged.

The final session of the conference began Sunday morning at the benign hour of 11:00 a.m., still it came a little too early for some of us who had thrown caution to the wind the night before. Sasha began the day with a typically enthusiastic account of his own adventures in chemical discovery. He was followed by Hans Plomp and Arno Adelaars who concluded the conference with a panel discussion on psychedelic rituals in the Netherlands.

Year 2000 Event Announced

After the three organizers of this year's conference bade us farewell, Jonathan Ott announced the location of the year 2000 event: Vancouver, British Columbia. Since the first biennial event in this tradition, in San Lui Potosi, Mexico in 1992, the planning has been successively passed to different groups of independent organizers. Ott and Rob Montgomery will convene the 2000 conference, building on their experience with Entheobotany in 1996. Plan now not to miss one of the first psychedelic conferences of the new millenium. •

The next event
of this kind will be in
Vancouver, British Columbia
in the year 2000.
Plan now not to miss
one of the first psychedelic
conferences of the new
millenium.

Tapes from Psychoactivity can be purchased from the
Conscious Dreams website at www.consciousdreams.com.