

CHAPTER ONE

“IDOLATRY,” HALLUCINOGENS, AND CULTURAL SURVIVAL

Almost as soon as Europeans set foot on American soil at the end of the fifteenth century, first in the Antilles and soon afterwards on the continent itself, they took note with varying degrees of fascination and revulsion of a strange indigenous custom they were later to recognize as an indispensable aspect of aboriginal religion and ritual in many parts of the New World: ecstatic intoxication with different plants to which the native peoples ascribed supernatural power, and which the Spaniards, not surprisingly, associated with the Devil's untiring effort to impede the victory of Christianity over traditional Indian religion.

In a sense they were right: the missionary clergy correctly perceived the sacred mushrooms, morning-glory seeds, peyote, snuffs, tobacco, and other “magical” (that is, consciousness-transforming) plants as obstacles to total conversion, since their continued use, in secret and under the constant threat of the most cruel punishment, from public flogging to burning alive at the stake, served to confirm and validate the traditional symbolic and religious world views of some of the aboriginal peoples and to consolidate resistance against their total destruction. And in fact, as ecclesiastical writers of later centuries were forced to admit, the great expenditure of missionary zeal, the preaching, and the punishment seemed in the end to have accomplished little more than to drive these practices underground, where they were even harder to combat. Or else the Indians had managed to work peyote, morning-glory seeds, and other sacred plants so subtly into Christian doctrine and ritual that they could lay claim to practicing proper respect for the Virgin Mary and the saints even while continuing to seek spiritual guidance with the aid of the divine inebriants of the pre-European past. The Spaniards, of course, saw this

combination as clever deceit; which in a way it was—in defense of the integrity of the traditional culture; on the other hand, such synthesis of Christian with pre-Conquest belief and ritual was an expectable consequence of culture contact and acculturation.

It is important to note that the early missionary fathers more often than not were content to accept as true the reports they heard from the Indians of the wondrous effects of the magical plants, especially in connection with divination and curing, the two areas in which the native hallucinogens played their most important role. What they seem to have objected to primarily—apart from their aversion to any kind of intoxication among their Indian charges—was that Christ was missing from the system; for that reason the supernatural effects could only be explained in terms of the Devil, who unceasingly tried to maintain and enlarge his ancient hold on the native souls whose salvation the Spaniards were convinced was their divine mission. Hernando Ruiz de Alarcón, a seventeenth-century divine who was commissioned by his bishop to investigate and uproot whatever indigenous belief and ritual had survived the first century of Spanish rule in Morelos and adjacent parts of central Mexico, devoted much of his *Tratado* of 1629 to Indian worship and use of the sacred morning glories, peyote, mushrooms, and tobacco, expressing the fear that these ancient "idolatrous" practices of the Indians might prove attractive enough to spread to the lower strata of Spanish colonial society.

The earliest European accounts of ritual intoxication date from the initial voyages of discovery toward the end of the fifteenth century. One Fray Ramón Pané was commissioned by Christopher Columbus, on his second voyage in 1496, to observe and set down the ceremonies and "antiquities" of the Arawakan-speaking Taino Indians on the island of Hispaniola, whom even the Spaniards recognized as a notably gentle people with an advanced culture (which, however, was soon to decline disastrously in response to European cruelties and previously unknown diseases). Pané described rites in which the natives inhaled an intoxicating herb they called *kohobba*,* "so strong that those who take it lose consciousness" and believe themselves to be in communication with the supernatural world. The Indians snuffed the potent powder through foot-long tubes, he reported, and "sorcerers" (i.e. shamans or curers) customarily took the drug along with their patients so as to learn the cause of the affliction and its proper treatment. The same sort of direct

**Kohobba*, whose use died out in the Antilles after the Conquest, along with hundreds of thousands of the native population, was made from the seeds of an acacia-like tree, *Anadenanthera peregrina*, which are rich in tryptamines and from which a number of Indian tribes in northeastern South America still prepare their intoxicating snuffs. Initially, however—indeed, until the early twentieth century—*kohobba* was generally identified with tobacco, an understandable error since tobacco was, and continues to be, used in similar ways elsewhere in South America. It is even possible that *kohobba* or a closely related word was also applied to intoxicating snuffs based mainly on tobacco.

psychic bond between healer and patient is still common in drug-assisted folk therapy in Mexico as well as Peru.

In the first decades of the sixteenth century, the Spanish conquerors of Mexico found the Indians there in possession of a considerable psychoactive pharmacopoeia that included several kinds of sacred mushrooms, peyote, *Datura* (a genus that may not have been unfamiliar to the invaders since it also played a role in medieval European medicine and witchcraft), an especially potent species of tobacco called *piciétl*, and a variety of other native plants with strangely "otherworldly" effects whose chemistry has only recently been clarified. Prominent among the latter are certain species of morning glories whose psychedelic seeds were held especially sacred—to the point of divinity—by the Aztecs and by peoples of central Mesoamerica, and whose active principles the scientific world was surprised to learn only a few years ago are closely allied to the synthetic hallucinogen LSD-25.

Nor was it different in South America. All across the continent, from the small-scale societies of tropical-forest manioc planters and hunters and collectors of wild foods to the complex civilization of the Incas in the Andes, the early explorers and missionaries found the drug-induced ecstatic trance—what we now call transformation of consciousness—to be an integral aspect of shamanistic religion. As we now know, the Indians of South America even more than those in Mesoamerica not only discovered and experimented with the psychoactive properties of many plants in their different environments, but also successfully tried combinations of unrelated species for the purpose of activating their psychedelic principles or heightening their effects.

For the native inhabitants in its path, the military, economic, and spiritual conquest of South America was—as it has continued to be in such areas as Amazonia—an almost unrelieved tragedy. Nor did it have the benefit of a Las Casas crying out for justice for the Indians, or even the painstaking kind of ethnography that is the Mexican legacy of Fray Bernardino de Sahagún, a remarkable sixteenth-century Franciscan who, like a few other churchmen of his time, was blessed with an insatiable and even largely sympathetic curiosity that caused him to compile for posterity all he could learn from Aztec informants of the native civilization that the Spaniards, himself included, had come to destroy. Sahagún's *Florentine Codex* and other writings include an impressive array of herbal lore which, together with the botanical and medicinal compilations of his learned contemporary, the royal physician Francisco Hernández, is the indispensable starting point for any botanical, taxonomical, or ethnographic investigation of the sacred hallucinogens. The beautifully illustrated mid-sixteenth-century Aztec herbal known as the *Codex Badianus* may also have been composed under the auspices or inspiration of Sahagún. For the century following the Conquest, the treatises of Jacinto de la Serna and of Ruiz de Alarcón are essential for an understanding of the continued functions of traditional hallucinogens, especially tobacco, morning glories,

peyote, and mushrooms, during the early Colonial period, and the ways in which these were affected by, or managed to evade, the processes of culture change and Christian acculturation.

Although there are references in the Colonial literature to ritual intoxication by means of plants, for South America the pre-nineteenth-century sources are not very satisfactory, and apart from Alexander von Humboldt's identification and discussion of one of the two major sources of hallucinogenic snuff on the Orinoco, there is little that could be called scientific. It is in fact no exaggeration to state that practically everything we know today of the botany, taxonomy, chemistry, and even anthropology of the ritual hallucinogens of South America ultimately had its genesis in the work of the modern ethnobotanists—from the Yorkshireman plant explorer Richard Spruce to Harvard's Richard Evans Schultes. Spruce in 1851 collected and named the first specimens of *Banisteriopsis caapi*, which he identified as the source of the intoxicating drink of Upper Amazonian Indians. Schultes's field research in the American tropics and in Mexico since the late 1930's has directly or indirectly led to the botanical, chemical and cultural identification of most of the vegetal hallucinogens of the New World, a task that is nonetheless not yet complete and will undoubtedly continue for years to come.