

Gods

of

Drugs

The God Within

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This is a new feature of *Substance Use and Misuse* that the editors hope will bring a new focus on substance use and misuse throughout history and in diverse cultures. Up until modern times, cultures throughout history have associated different substances with specific deities, incorporated them into specific myths, and used substances in specific rituals. Examining these associations is likely to give insight into how these substances were viewed in various cultures and the place that they had in those cultures. Consequently, we offer this new feature exploring these associations as a way of increasing understanding of the functions of substance use in different cultures over historical time.

Keywords Bacchanalia, Dionysius/Bacchus, entheogen, Freya, Odin, Thor

This is the inaugural article of a new series for *Substance Use and Misuse* that will explore the religious and spiritual factors that have been associated with the use of a variety of substances in ancient, traditional, and contemporary cultures. As such, it is both introduction and invitation. It attempts to set the stage for what will follow and asks serious scholars of substance use, religion, and spiritual traditions to contribute their own offerings to this undertaking.

The title derives from the word entheogen. It is a word derived from the Greek words *ἐνθεος* (*entheos*) and *γενέσθαι* (*genesthai*). *Entheos* is an adjective meaning “full of god,” “inspired,” or even “possessed” and is the root of the English word *enthusiasm*. *Genesthai* means “to come into being” or “to come forth.” Together, the meaning is that a substance produces a state in which

a person experiences a sense of being inspired or transported beyond himself/herself in a way that is identified as distinctly religious or spiritual. The term was coined by ethno botanists and scholars of mythology to describe substances that were considered to have the “god within them” and thus facilitate the experience of the presence of the god, giving access to his/her wisdom.

It contained the possessing spirit of “the god within” it: for this reason, it is appropriately called an entheogen. No other term (like “drug,” “hallucinogen,” etc.) is correct or has the right cultural, psychological, or religious connotations. (Ruck & Staples, 1994, p. 81)

From very early times, there exists archeological evidence that human beings have used psychoactive substances. Recent evidence indicates that the fermentation of ethyl alcohol from sugar-containing plants and other foodstuffs was well under way by 7,000 BCE, excavated in Jiahu, China (McGovern, 2009). Further, early beers, wines, and *grog* mixtures were often laced with various herbs and tree resins, sometimes for their preservative or flavoring attributes and sometimes for their psychoactive properties (McGovern, 2009). In at least some of these instances, the resulting drink was considered as conferring divine attributes.

In our own time, there has been some limited systematic exploration of the entheogenic properties of a few substances. Pahnke (1963), on Good Friday of 1962, randomly gave psilocybin or an active placebo of nicotine to a group of 20 divinity students with the result that “the persons who received psilocybin experienced to a greater extent than did the controls the phenomena described by our typology of mysticism” (p. 220). Huston Smith (2000) who went on to become one of the most respected

scholars of world religion was a participant in Pahnke's Good Friday experiment. He later described his experience as "the most powerful cosmic homecoming I have ever experienced" (p. 101).

Twenty-five years later, Doblin managed to identify 19 of the original 20 subjects and interviewed 16 of them (Doblin, 1991). He found that even after the passage of a quarter of a century, the perception and recollection of the experiences of the participants were essentially unchanged since Phanke's six-month follow-up:

This long-term follow-up, conducted twenty-four to twenty-seven years after the original experiment, provides further support to the findings of the original experiment. All psilocybin subjects participating in the long-term follow-up, but none of the controls, still considered their original experience to have had genuinely mystical elements and to have made a uniquely valuable contribution to their spiritual lives. The positive changes described by the psilocybin subjects at six months, which in some cases involved basic vocational and value choices and spiritual understandings, had persisted over time and in some cases had deepened. (p. 23)

More recently, Griffiths, Richards, McCann, and Jesse (2006) reported a very well-controlled, double-blind study of the effects of psilocybin with regard to spiritual or mystical experience. The participants were 30 hallucinogen-naïve adults reporting regular participation in religious or spiritual activities. Two or three sessions were conducted at two-month intervals. These volunteers received orally administered psilocybin (30 mg/70 kg) or methylphenidate hydrochloride (40 mg/70 kg) in a counterbalanced order. To obscure the study design, six additional volunteers received methylphenidate in the first two sessions and unblinded psilocybin in the third session. The setting was comfortable and supportive but not religious. Measures of the experiences during the experiment were by self-report and of subsequent changes in behavior as a result of these experiences were also by self report confirmed by community observers. The results were reported as follows:

Psilocybin produced a range of acute perceptual changes, subjective experiences, and labile moods including anxiety. Psilocybin also increased measures of mystical experience. At 2 months, the volunteers rated the psilocybin experience as having substantial personal meaning and spiritual significance and attributed to the experience sustained positive changes in attitudes and behavior consistent with changes rated by community observers. (Griffiths et al., 2006, p. 268)

Griffiths, Richards, Johnson, McCann, and Jesse (2008) did a 14-month follow-up on these 36 subjects to determine whether the nature and significance of their experiences with psilocybin had changed since their initial research. They found that the subjects' perception of the nature and significance of their experiences had not changed.

When administered under supportive conditions, psilocybin occasioned experiences similar to spontaneously occurring mystical experiences that, at 14-month follow-up, were considered by volunteers to be among the most personally meaningful and spiritually significant of their lives. (p. 621)

Trichter, Klimo, and Krippner (2009) reported the results of research done with 54 volunteers (five controls and 49 in the experimental group) participating in two separate ceremonies in which they received ayahuasca under the leadership of two separate shamans from Peru. Unfortunately, the study has multiple methodological problems, most significantly no standardization of the content and dose of the ayahuasca preparation used in these separate ceremonies. Consequently, the quantitative measures come into serious question. However, the qualitative aspects of the study that consisted of a series of brief interviews 24–72 hr before the ceremony, 12 hr, 1 week, 1 month, and 3 months after the ceremony as well as written accounts done by subjects within 12 hr after the ceremony yielded some interesting results. The personal written accounts of the participants seem most significant. Several dominant themes appear in these accounts, mentioned by 40%–50% of participants; in an order of frequency, they are: (1) presence of light/geometric patterns; (2) sense of honor, respect, gratitude, and/or awe; (3) sense of connection; (4) self-reflection and/or insights on personal life; (5) spiritual experience; (6) supernatural experiences; (7) sense of peace and/or calm; and (8) healing.

The results of the handful of experiments of differing scientific rigor conducted in this area of study would seem to point to the fact that some psychoactive substances, but not necessarily all psychoactive substances, can produce experiences in participants, which they identify as being distinctly spiritual or transcendent. Both the subjective accounts of participants and the measures that exist in this area indicate that these experiences are at least "peak" experiences and at best mystical in nature.

In some cultures, such entheogenic substances have been seen as a means to facilitate an individual's experience of spiritual realms not available in ordinary consciousness. This is the case with ibogain by the Bwiti Cult (Fernandez, 1982) and other secret societies of Gabon and Zaire in Africa or the use of the fly agaric mushroom (*Amanita muscaria*) among shamans of native Siberian peoples. In other cultures, the god or some specific attribute of the god is seen as present in the entheogenic substance. Such may have been the case in the use of the mysterious drink called "kykeon" that preceded initiation into the Eleusinian Mysteries of the cult of Demeter and Persephone (McGovern, 2009; Ruck & Staples, 1994). Perhaps, most singularly, the mysterious plant and the drink made from it called Soma in the Vedas of Indo-Aryan culture held a place as at least a demi-god, if not a divinity (Smith, 2000, pp. 48–49).

Although the use of the term entheogen was initially intended to refer only to substances that were psychoactive, there certainly are arguments that can be made that substances that are not capable of producing altered states, in and of themselves, can also meet this definition. In Roman Catholicism and in the Episcopal and Anglican traditions, the consecrated bread and wine contain the person of Jesus, the God-man. In Hellenic and Pre-Hellenic societies, the olive and the laurel were viewed as



FIGURE 1. Dionysius/Bacchus.

being sacred and as having the god within them: Athena in the case of the olive and Apollo in the case of the laurel.

More to the point, entheogens are almost always sacred to or closely associated with a specific divinity in a specific culture. In Greco/Roman cultures, wine was associated with Dionysius/Bacchus, to whom it was sacred and in whose festivals its heavy consumption played a central role. Little is known about the exact rituals of the Bacchanalia. Euripides in the *Bacchae* describes the feral frenzy of activity and aggression that the rites brought about in the women who participated. There is even some indication that the rites involved not only the drinking of wine but also the consumption of wild plants that may have had psychogenic properties (Wasson, Kramrisch, Ott, & Ruck, 1986). In Rome, the rites were at first only open to women and the initiations and celebrations lasted for two days a year. Later, men were admitted, the rites were moved from daytime to the night, and initiations and celebrations were held five nights in each month. Eventually, the Roman Senate banned the rites and the feast was replaced with a tamer celebration (Figure 1).

Henbane (*Hyoscyamus niger*) was called *belinuntia* by Celtic peoples, indicating its association to Bel, the god of the sun, oracles, and medicine. This same plant was associated with Thor by early Germanic people and with Jupiter by the Romans (both gods being also associated with thunder) (Ratsch, 2004, p. 170) (Figure 2).

Hemp (*Cannabis sativa*, *Cannabis indica*, and *Cannabis ruderalis*), among Celtic and early Germanic people, was associated with Freya, goddess of love and sensuality (Ratsch, 2004, p. 173) (Figure 3).

The feminine flower of the hemp seemed especially sacred and archeological digs have discovered evidence that Celtic and Germanic tribes were placing hemp flowers in the graves of their dead 2,500 years ago (Kessler, 1985). In Germanic tradition, opium poppies (*Papaver somniferum*), belladonna (*Atropa belladonna*), and fly agaric mushrooms (*Amanita muscaria*) are all sacred to Odin/Wotan under his titles as “the healer,” “the rag-

ing,” and “the ecstatic,” respectively (Ratsch, 2004, pp. 174–175) (Figure 4).

Examples could be multiplied, but the point is that the god or goddess with whom the substance is associated seems to indicate something about *how* that substance was regarded and used by a specific culture at a specific point in time as well as for whom it was permitted, for whom it was forbidden, and for whom its use was an obligation. The nature and character of the divinity illuminates the nature and character of the substance for a specific group of people at a specific historical moment and associated with necessary conditions. Perhaps, this relationship is also reciprocal. The editors of *Substance Use and Misuse* thought it would be interesting to open a section of the journal to specifically such explorations. Consequently, we invite serious scholars from any number of disciplines to consider such an undertaking and to answer questions such as:



FIGURE 2. Thor.



FIGURE 3. Freya.

- What is the specific association of a god, a goddess, or otherworldly being with a specific substance that can fit the definition of an entheogen?
- What does the character of such a being indicate about the attitudes, beliefs, and practices of a specific culture in relation to that substance?
- What does the use of the entheogenic substance say about the attitudes and beliefs of the culture in relation to the divinity?
- What role does the use of such a substance play in the life of that group of people?



FIGURE 4. Odin: the seventh-century Tängelgarda stone.

- Is the use of the substance opened to the entire culture or is it limited to a specific group within the culture and what does that seem to indicate?
- What benefits come to the society in which such use occurs? Is the use socially significant?
- Is the use of the substance only sacred or can it also serve a profane purpose as well?

as well as to raise additional questions that can stimulate needed dialogues and explorations in this complex area.

The editors invite brief articles addressing such questions in the hope that such endeavors can help illuminate the relationship between the use of substances and the spiritual and religious notions of humankind.

Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflicts of interest. The authors alone are responsible for the content and writing of the article.

RÉSUMÉ

Le Dieu intérieur

Il s'agit d'un volet nouveau de la question des drogues, leur usage et abus qui, les rédacteurs espèrent, apportera un nouvel aperçu sur l'usage et l'abus des drogues au long de l'histoire et dans diverses cultures. Jusqu'à l'époque moderne, dans différentes cultures à travers l'histoire, on associait certaines drogues avec certains dieux et certains mythes, et on les utilisait dans certains rituels. L'examen de ces associations est susceptible de donner un aperçu de la façon dont ces substances étaient perçues dans ces cultures et la place qu'elles y occupaient. Par conséquent, nous vous proposons une nouvelle façon d'explorer ces associations comme un moyen de mieux comprendre le rôle qu'ont joué ces drogues dans les différentes cultures au fil de l'histoire.

RESUMEN

El Dios Interno

Este es un nuevo tema de Uso y Mal Uso de Sustancias que los editores esperan que traiga un nuevo enfoque sobre el uso y mal uso de sustancias a través de la historia y dentro de diversas culturas. Hasta los tiempos modernos, las culturas a través de la historia han asociado diferentes sustancias con deidades específicas, incorporándolas dentro de los mitos específicos, y utilizaban sustancias en rituales específicos. El examinar estas asociaciones puede proveer una idea de cómo estas sustancias se han contemplado en varias culturas y el lugar que se ocupan en esas culturas. Por lo tanto, ofrecemos este nuevo tema para explorar estas asociaciones como una forma de aumentar la comprensión de las funciones del uso de sustancias en las diferentes culturas a través del tiempo histórico.

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Theodore M. Godlaski, M.Div., CADC, is an Associate Clinical Professor of Social Work at the University of Kentucky. He spent 23 years doing treatment, program administration, and clinical supervision before coming to the University of Kentucky School of Medicine, Center on Drug and Alcohol Research in 1993. There he was the Coprincipal Investigator on a NIDA RO1 grant that developed

a treatment program specifically for rural substance misusers. He also developed a statewide treatment outcome system, a method for assessing individuals convicted of driving under the influence of intoxicating substances, and directed several research projects evaluating the outcome of various treatment approaches. In August 2002, he moved from the Center on Drug and Alcohol Research to the College of Social Work in order to devote more time to teaching. He teaches psychopathology and a course on substance misuse, intimate violence, and risk management to graduate students. He is currently a member of the Kentucky Chemical Dependency Counselors Certification Board and sits on the Board's ethics committee. He is also an area editor for the journal *Substance Use and Misuse* (formerly *International Journal on the Addictions*). At the College of Social Work, he has continued to be involved in treatment outcome and program evaluation research. He was recently the Coprincipal Investigator on a project funded by the Metanexus and Templeton Foundations, examining the effectiveness of inclusion of Native Alaskan healing practices in substance user treatment. He is currently the Principal Investigator evaluating the effectiveness of a program that provides assertive community treatment for homeless individuals and on another CSAT-funded project evaluating the effectiveness of a Recovery Oriented System of Care for Appalachian substance misusers. He is a faculty member of the Middle Eastern Summer Institute on Drug Use. He has published in both referred and professional journals as well as contributed chapters to several books. He presents papers and workshops both nationally and internationally.

GLOSSARY

Ayahuasca (also known as Caapi and Yaje): A vine that grows in the western half of the Amazon valley, and is used by various tribes of the valley and by tribes on the Pacific slopes of the Columbian and Ecuadorian Andes. Usually, the bark of the vine is steeped in cold or boiling water and the liquid can be taken alone or with the additive of various psychoactive plants. The drink is quite bitter and even nauseating and the resulting intoxication can range from mild and pleasant to severe and debilitating. Harmine and β -carboline alkaloid appear to be the active ingredients. The effect results in visual hallucination in color and ends in a deep sleep with vivid dreams.

Eleusinian mysteries (Greek: Ἐλευσίνια Μυστήρια): These mysteries were initiation ceremonies held every year for the cult of Demeter and Persephone based at

Eleusis in ancient Greece. Of all the mysteries celebrated in ancient times, these were the ones with greatest importance. These myths and mysteries, which begun in the Mycenaean period (c. 1600 BC) and lasted for 2,000 years, were a major festival during the Hellenic era, later spreading to Rome. The name of the town, Eleusís, is a variant of the noun ἔλενσις, *éleusis*, meaning "arrival." The rites, ceremonies, and beliefs were kept secret, as initiation was believed to unite the worshipper with the gods and included promises of divine power and rewards in the afterlife. There are many paintings and pieces of pottery that depict various aspects of the Mysteries. Because the Mysteries involved visions and conjuring of an afterlife, some scholars believe that the power and longevity of the Eleusinian Mysteries came from psychedelic agents.

Entheogen (Greek: ἔνθεος γενέσθαι): A substance used in religious or spiritual ceremonies that gave the user access to experiences that transcend the personal and mundane. In some cases, these experiences were considered to confer divine wisdom, knowledge of the world of spirits, or contact with ancestors. Most such substances are not *known to cause tolerance or withdrawal*.

Fermentation: The action of specific yeasts on liquids containing sugars that produces ethyl alcohol and carbon dioxide.

Fly agaric (*Amanita muscaria*): A mushroom with a distinctive red cap that has white or pale yellow spots. Several mushroom caps are dried in the sun or roasted over fire and then infused in water or milk. It was used by Finno-Ugrian people in eastern and western Siberia as well as by several groups of Athabaskan people in the North-West North America as an aid to shamanistic rituals of healing and divination. There is also speculation that the Soma mentioned in the Rig Veda had it as one of its ingredients. Because the psychoactive ingredient passes through the body unmetabolized and is excreted in the urine, the drinking of the urine of individuals intoxicated on the mushrooms was a common practice. Ibotenic acid, muscimol and muscazone appear to be the psychoactive components that produce euphoria, colored visions, macropsia, religious fervor, and deep sleep.

Henbane (*Hyoscyamus niger*): A herb that grows widely throughout Europe. It is thought that it was used in ancient Greece and in Rome as an aid to divination. There have been suggestions that the priestess of Delphi prophesied under its influence. In northern Europe, it was a frequent addition to beer (the term pilsner refers originally to henbane). The herb was dried and then smoked or used as an incense in a closed area where its smoke could be easily inhaled. The dried herb and its seeds were additives to beer and the basic ingredient of many "witches" potions. The active ingredients appear to be tropane alkaloids, especially hyoscyamine and scopolamine, which produce a trance-like state.

Ibogain (*Tabernanthe iboga*): A shrub that is native to western Africa. The bark of the roots, either fresh or

dried, are eaten as is or soaked in palm wine. It is widely used in any number of secret cults in Gabon, Congo, and Zaire as part of initiation and other ceremonies. It is believed that the plant gives access to the world of spirits and ancestors, is a powerful stimulant, has aphrodisiac qualities, and allows individuals to become reconciled to their mortality. The plant contains numerous indole alkaloids, the most important being ibogaine. About 10 g of dried root is sufficient to cause hallucinations. In Europe and America, there are clinicians who have tested the substance as a cure for substance dependence.

Mystical experience: Although there is no one correct definition of a mystical experience, psychologist and philosopher William James described four characteristics of religious/mystical experience in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. According to James, such an experience is:

- Transient—the experience is temporary; the individual soon returns to a “normal” frame of mind.
- Ineffable—the experience cannot be adequately put into words.
- Noetic—the individual feels that he or she has learned something valuable from the experience.
- Passive—the experience happens to the individual, largely without conscious control. Although there are activities, such as meditation, that can make mystical experience more likely, it is not something that can be turned on and off at will.

Others like Robert Charles Zaehner would maintain that in the mystical experience, all “otherness” disappears and the believer becomes one with the transcendent. The believer discovers that he or she is not distinct from the cosmos, the deity, or the other reality, but one with it. Zaehner identified two distinctively different mystical experiences: natural and religious mystical experiences. Natural mystical experiences are, for example, experiences of the “deeper self” or experiences of oneness with nature. He argued that the experiences typical of “natural mysticism” are quite different from the experiences typical of religious mysticism. Natural mystical experiences are not considered to be religious experiences because they are not linked to a particular tradition, but natural mystical experiences are spiritual experiences that can have a profound effect on the individual. Religious mystical experience is an experience of union with a divinity known to the believer through faith.

Soma: A plant that was elevated to the status of a god by the Aryan people who swept down from the north to occupy the Indus Valley 3,500 years ago. Of the 1,000 hymns in the Rig Veda, 120 are devoted exclusively to Soma, and references to this vegetal sacrament run through many of the other hymns. The plant was used as the primary ingredient in an intoxicating drink (also called soma) that was used in religious rit-

uals but was never identified. In 1968, Gordon Wasson made a convincing argument that Soma is the fly agaric mushroom.

Spiritual: It refers to an ultimate or immaterial reality, an inner path enabling a person to discover the essence of their being, or the deepest values and meanings by which people live. Spiritual practices, including meditation, prayer, and contemplation, are intended to develop an individual’s inner life; such practices often lead to an experience of connectedness with a larger reality, yielding a more comprehensive self with other individuals or the human community, with nature or the cosmos, or with the divine realm. Spirituality is often experienced as a source of inspiration or orientation in life. It can encompass belief in immaterial realities or experiences of the immanent or transcendent nature of the world.

Transcendent: It is the one that goes beyond the purely material and individuated.

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