5-2022

Hallucinogenic Neoshamanism as Antimodernism: Development and Ethical Considerations

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts in Anthropology

by

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University of Arkansas
Bachelor of Arts in Political Science, 2019

May 2022
University of Arkansas

This thesis is approved for recommendation to the Graduate Council.

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Abstract

Humans have been using hallucinogenic plants and fungi for thousands of years. Historically, people around the world have made use of these substances to aid in their spiritual development. Studies of the usage of hallucinogens in indigenous societies often use the term “shamanism” to characterize the associated system of belief and ritual practices. In popular understanding, shamanism is a religious system that features highly ritualized performances in which a practitioner (shaman) utilizes an altered state of consciousness to gain access to realms inhabited by spirits with the intent of recruiting their help to resolve a problem, cure a patient, correct a misfortune, or predict the future among other things. As it was historically used as a catch-all term for a variety of indigenous religious systems, it has been criticized as an overgeneralization at its best and racism at its worst. However, this has not stopped its growing popularity as a spiritual technique among Western spiritual seekers, a phenomenon referred to as neo-shamanism. While not all and perhaps only a minority of neo-shamanic practitioners utilize hallucinogens in their rituals, many Western users of hallucinogens such as ayahuasca, peyote, and psilocybin mushrooms utilize ritual techniques and belief systems that are borrowed from indigenous spirituality. Western seekers are also attracted to places such as South America to participate in what they consider to be authentic shamanism. The growing interest in hallucinogens has also affected the medical establishment with a growing number of studies suggesting a psycho-pharmacological potential for these compounds. In this study, I examine the existing points of tension between indigenous hallucinogen use, neo-shamanic practices that borrow from the former, and the increased medicalization of these compounds through a critical review of the relevant literature.

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Introduction

Humans have been using hallucinogenic plants and fungi for thousands of years (Guerra-Doce 2014). Historically, people around the world have made use of these substances to aid in their spiritual development (Rudgley 1993). Studies of the usage of hallucinogens in indigenous societies often use the term “shamanism” to characterize the associated system of belief and ritual practices. In popular understanding, shamanism is a religious system that features highly ritualized performances in which a practitioner (shaman) utilizes an altered state of consciousness to gain access to realms inhabited by spirits with the intent of recruiting their help to resolve a problem, cure a patient, correct a misfortune, or predict the future among other things. This ritual structure has grown in popularity as a spiritual technique among Western spiritual seekers, a phenomenon referred to as neoshamanism. Additionally, many Western users of hallucinogens utilize ritual techniques and belief systems that are borrowed from indigenous spirituality and often perceived as “shamanic” (Znamenski 2007). Western seekers are also attracted to places such as South America to participate in what they consider to be authentic shamanism (Fotiou 2016). The growing interest in hallucinogens has also affected the medical establishment with a growing number of studies suggesting a psycho-pharmacological potential for these compounds (Davis et al. 2019, 2021; Fecska, Bokor, and Winkelman 2016; Griffiths 2016; Li et al. 2021; Luoma et al. 2020; Palhano-Fontes et al. 2019; Sanches et al. 2016). In this study, I examine the development of neoshamanism in the West as a participatory form of antimodernism. From this perspective, the usage of hallucinogens in conjunction with “shamanic” rituals can be seen to magnify the effect – namely, enabling a visionary experience that reenchants a world seen to be steeped in the ills of modern living. Yet, as it often does, the hegemonic system is co-opting these compounds into a medical paradigm that undercuts spiritually motivated hallucinogen use as a form of subversion. Additionally, the way that indigenous peoples figure into neoshamanism is problematic in that it often masks the exploitative history of Western-indigenous interactions.

Throughout this paper, I utilize the history of shamanism as an anthropological concept to examine hallucinogenic consumption in the West. I begin with the origins of the word “shaman” to examine changing attitudes towards indigenous spirituality. I follow this by presenting shamanism’s transformation from a regionally specific spiritual practice in the 18th century to a global religious category by the 1960s. This view of shamanism as a universal spiritual phenomenon is discussed, highlighting its effect on popular perspectives of shamanism. I then consider the reaction to this paradigm from anthropologists who favor a localized approach to indigenous religion, rejecting the generalizations of prior scholars. Next, I consider the influence that these two approaches have had on Western perspectives. Following this, I examine the medicalization of hallucinogens with a focus on ayahuasca. I then spend time discussing the historical development of neoshamanism as a practice. I follow this with a discussion of critical perspectives on neoshamanism, considering the ethical considerations present throughout these arguments. In closing, I review lessons learned from Mark Plotkin’s experience as a mediator between indigenous medical knowledge and western pharmacology to speculate on the outlook of Western-indigenous interactions in the context of hallucinogens, followed by thoughts on future research. I hope this study contributes to a growing examination of Western relationships with hallucinogens and the indigenous people that have traditionally relied on them. I believe a greater degree of understanding between both groups can facilitate a cultural exchange that is built upon mutual respect and dignity rather than domination and exploitation.

It is important to first make a note about my usage of shamanism throughout this paper before continuing. In her seminal 1992 review of the state of shamanism, Jane Atkinson provides a quote from Michael Taussig that I believe summarizes the general attitude of anthropologists towards the term shamanism. He stated that "shamanism is… a made-up, modern, Western category, an artful reification of disparate practices, snatches of folklore and overarching folklorizations, residues of long-established myths, intermingled with the politics of academic departments, curricula, conferences, journal juries and articles, [and] funding agencies" (Taussig as quoted in Atkinson 1992, 307). I recognize the fallacies that underlie the deployment of shamanism as a discrete religious category, but naturally find it useful to use the term shamanism when discussing its historical trajectory as a lens in which indigenous religion is perceived. When appropriate, I use the term shamanisms to recognize the wide array of belief systems and practices that constitute it.

Despite its historical misuse and the baggage it carries, I still find shamanism to be a valuable concept if a robust understanding of its history is included. For this reason, scholars of religion and anthropologists should be careful in using the term out of a well-established context. However, the term is unique in its positive connotation among the casual reader. While this might mask some of the darker sides of indigenous spirituality, the term is largely free of the negative connotations associated with terms like witch doctor or sorcerer. Additionally, shaman is useful as a gender-neutral term unlike medicine-man or medicine-woman. Of course, there remains a risk of reducing the spiritual practices of disparate communities into a homogenous category. However, I believe the issue is with how the term has been deployed historically, rather than an inherent flaw of the word. Consider the usefulness of the term polytheism in comparing and contrasting religious beliefs. The usage of shamanism needs to be accompanied by an understanding that it is more of a spiritual feature rather than a spiritual category, much as the practice of prayer is a common religious feature but is not universal in culturally specific meanings and processes. This is all to say that I don't think we should rid ourselves of the term "shamanism" quite yet.

History of Shaman Idiom

My review of shamanism as a concept relies largely on the work of Andrei A. Znamenski. His book *The Beauty of the Primitive: Shamanism and the Western Imagination* is a simply written but illuminating text on the origins of the shaman idiom, its spread as a religious category, and its co-optation by Western spiritualists (2007). The modern term shaman comes from an Evenki phrase, *šaman* or *xaman,* a mixed gender phrase used to describe spiritual practitioners. A rough translation of the phrase could mean "agitated", "excited", or "raised", depending on the context. While there are many other indigenous groups in Siberia, each with their own language and specific spiritual practices, the term shaman was adopted as a general term to describe all practitioners in the region. This is likely due to the nomadic lifestyle of the Evenki, making them a common feature in the landscape. Despite the close contact of Siberian natives and Russian populations, it was early German explorers to the region who introduced the term to Western Europe as *schaman* (Znamenski 2007, 3).

Early Enlightenment explorers to the region did not look favorably upon the seances they witnessed throughout Siberia. As they introduced the term shaman into the Western lexicon along with it came the negative associations so characteristic of Enlightenment views on indigenous religions. While the local indigenous population viewed shamans as an important link between themselves and the other worldly reality of spirits, Enlightenment texts described them as charlatans and tricksters. They were often lumped into the same category as jesters and court entertainers yet of a decidedly second-class rate. Shamans even earned the disdain of Catherine the Great in her play *the Siberian Shaman* in which she depicted shamans as greedy manipulators of their neighbors and friends (Znamenski 2007, 8).

It would not be till the Romantic period in Europe that shamanism was reexamined. The German *Naturphilosophie* tradition in particular took great interest in indigenous spiritual practices. While not yet elevated to the level of moral superiority ascribed to them later, the image of the indigenous spiritual practitioner appealed to the Western Romantic desire for a return to the mysterious and spiritual elements of human life that had been dispelled by rationalism and materialism. Consider the following description of Chukhi shamanism from Ferdinand von Wrangel, an arctic explorer and governor of Russian colonies in North America. "Almost all those who up to the present have expressed an opinion on the shamans represented them as ill-qualified impostors of a crude and vulgar kind, whose ecstasies are nothing more than an illusion created to take advantage of people. From the observations I made during my journeys in Siberia, I concluded that this judgement is harsh and unfounded" (quoted in Znamenski 2007, 21). Wrangel also reflects that he finds himself strangely drawn to the dark and mysterious elements of shamanic rituals (Znamenski 2007, 21).

Yet one intellectual holdover from the Enlightenment that was reinforced by Romantic era thinkers was the tendency to view the "Orient" as the root of civilization and religion. Consequently, Siberian shamanism was often interpreted as a degeneration of classical Eastern faiths, Hinduism and Buddhism in particular. The Hindu connection was first articulated by Gerhard Müller, a German historian of Siberia. He argued that early converts to the Vedic religion of the Indo-Aryans enjoyed a degree of flexibility due to the syncretic nature of the faith. However, this group eventually found themselves under pressure from the centralization brought upon by the development of Brahmanism. Traveling north, they spread their particular faith to the peoples they encountered, playing an inter-generational game of telephone in which the mythology of Vedism was continually altered and diluted until it manifested in its modern form: shamanism. Müller argued that the presence of a multitude of spirits and beings within Asian shamanism resulted from the polytheistic beliefs of Vedism. The pattern in which Buddhism spread from India throughout Asia was also used as evidence for his theory (Znamenski 2007, 12). Using a linguistic approach, Friedrich Schlegel argued that the similarities between the Sanskrit *samaneans* (a word used to describe Buddhist priests operating in India) and the Evenki *šaman* was evidence of an Indian connection. Similarly, Schlegel argued that these early Buddhists were forced from India by the Brahmins and thus spread their beliefs throughout Asia, resulting in its degeneration into shamanism (Znamenski 2007, 13-14). Charles Godfrey Leland, an American folklorist, was even more ambitious. Using superficial connections between the legends of Europe and Asia and those of indigenous North America, Leland promoted a theory that supposed shamanism had spread from Central Asia into Europe before using Greenland's Inuit to island-hop to the Americas (Znamenski 2007, 15). Yet, Leland's belief that shamanism was a global phenomenon was in the minority as much of academia still saw shamanism as a regional spiritual complex unique to Siberia.

This sort of speculative genealogy of religions is consistent with the positivist framework deployed by 18th and 19th century social scientists. While no longer in vogue, particularly within anthropology, there are still remnants of this paradigm within academia (Rush 2013). Perhaps more importantly, however, is the way in which these modes of thought trickle down from the ivory tower into the popular imagination. While often lacking academic rigor in regard to evidence, these grand theories are quickly latched onto by the public. One prominent example of this phenomenon is the popularity of Jared Diamond's *Guns, Germs, and Steel* and the environmental deterministic paradigm it deploys which is often criticized as a largely reductionist view of world history (Jaschik 2005). One can also see in the "Oriental" theory the roots of later religious scholars such as Mircea Eliade who argued for shamanism's place as a universal spiritual phenomenon (Znamenski 2007). This relationship between academic thought and public opinion is a crucial component in understanding the development of neoshamanism. As will be further developed, modern Western perceptions of shamanism and indigenous communities generally speaking is defined by a long literary tradition with roots in the Romantic era.

The first steps out of Siberia for the shamanism idiom were a result of the Jesup North Pacific Expedition of 1897, sponsored by Morris Jesup, American industrialist and president of the American Museum of Natural History. Led and organized by Franz Boas, the expedition sought to uncover connections between the native peoples of Siberia and northwest coast of North America, a presupposed link due to the Bering Land Bridge theory. Boas employed a number of Russian ethnographers who had developed contacts in the region during their time as revolutionary exiles. Naturally, the orientation of the research expedition and the introduction of Siberian ethnographies into Western academia led to comparisons between the spirituality of Siberia and the Northwest coast of North America. This connection was formalized in the resulting public exhibition of materials gathered which was covered by a *New York Times Magazine* article titled "Ancient Religion of Shamanism Flourishing To-Day." (Znamenski 2007, 65). Znamenski summarizes the article as largely reflecting the position of the expedition on shamanism "as a phenomenon that went beyond northern Asia and included a variety of rituals in addition to the classical shamanic séance" (2007, 67). Scholarship that followed would build on this trend and further develop shamanism as an expansive religious system.

It was the work of religious scholar Mircea Eliade, however, that truly transformed shamanism from a regional curiosity to a global spiritual phenomenon. A Romanian historian of religion, philosopher, and novelist, his most popular and influential book, *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*, viewed shamanism as a universal spiritual system that had its origins in the human psyche rather than in history or culture. Eliade utilized a phenomenological approach that prioritized the personal experience of the sacred and frowned upon explanations that relied on socio-economic conditions, history, or psychology (Znamenski 2007, 170-171). While still arguably a Romantic approach to indigenous spirituality, Eliade diverged from earlier scholars who sought to trace the spread of shamanism from a singular geographic origin by arguing that shamanism had “sprang up independently among all peoples at the dawn of their history” (Znamenski 2007, 171).

His thesis relied on identifying universal elements of shamanic belief between cultures and societies without history of contact and mingling. This includes the symbolic significance of the center or *axis mundi*, the division of reality into three planes consisting of lower, middle, and upper levels, and the shamanic soul flight to the upper world. The most important feature of global shamanism to Eliade, however, was the use of altered states of consciousness to traverse the worlds of spirits. More specifically, Eliade prioritized states of ecstasy as central to the shamanic experience. From a cross-cultural comparison of myths from around the world, he also argued that shamans were those who could still directly access the sacred after humankind lost their connection with nature. Thus, shamans represented a connection to a past time in which humans and animals were not distinct entities but could communicate and transform between states of being (Znamenski 2007, 172-173).

The release of the English translation of Eliade's *Shamanism* (1964) was aptly timed. Eliade's ideas found a longing audience of counter-culturalists who sought other lifeways for the answers they felt were not addressed by Western civilization, namely spiritual wellbeing and self-actualization. Eliade himself promoted a messianic image of indigenous spirituality, promoting the potential of learning from indigenous communities in order to reconvene with nature (Znamenski 2007, 177). Eliade's work can be viewed as a continuation of the antimodernist attitudes of the Romantic era. Principally, Eliade's conception of shamanism made indigenous spirituality more accessible to Westerner's yearning for spiritual insight from the "primitive" world. In turn, shamanism becomes a system in which Westerners can perform their antimodernist attitudes. Similarly, Eliade's development of shamanism as belonging "to man as such, not to man as a historical being" situated the spiritual belief and practices of many indigenous peoples as not theirs to own and stripped them of the cultural contexts that make them unique (Znamenski 2007, 172). This arguably sets the groundwork for the co-option of indigenous spirituality as a sort of retrieving from storage rather than an appropriation of otherness. This pragmatic view of indigenous life as a toolbox of values for Westerners to adopt in order to mitigate the harms of civilized life extends to the hallucinogens utilized within some of the world's shamanisms.

Critiques of Eliade are wide-ranging and backed by ethnographic evidence. Znamenski mentions a few. For instance, Eliade's contention that indigenous spirituality universally divided spirit entities into the categories of good and bad contradicts numerous examples of spirits being considered ambivalent and capable of helping and harming (Znamenski 2007, 174). This also relates to the modern perception of shamanism as a wholly benevolent enterprise that often masks the darker sides of some shamanisms, another strategy to make indigenous spirituality more digestible in the context of Western values. Additionally, much of Eliade’s theorization on the universal nature of shamanism is steeped in Christian symbolism. Znamenski suggests that, while this weakened the significance of his work from an academic perspective, it is likely that this infusion of familiar imagery benefited the popularity of his ideas (2007, 175-176). Despite these well-founded criticisms, the influence of Eliade’s work can still be seen in the academic world as well as in popular perspectives on shamanism.

Znamenski’s approach to shamanism as an academic construct rather than a distinct religious category, firmly places his scholarship in the rhetorical school of shamanism studies. Coined by Thomas A. DuBois in his article *Trends in Contemporary Research on Shamanism*, the rhetorical approach to shamanism is defined by the position that the term is “a reflection of broader trends within the study of religion and anthropology” rather than an accurate depiction of indigenous spiritual life (2011, 101). This position prioritizes ethnographies that highlight the political and social contexts of specific indigenous practices as well as the interactions within such a system. These studies localize indigenous spirituality and consequently resist generalizations of shamanism. Generally, a rhetorical approach views any similarities between indigenous religious practices as the result of a shared predisposition for ritualized performances and belief in non-human entities, many of which could be considered under the umbrella of shamanism if defined broadly enough (Atkinson 1992, 301).

In her review of the current state of shamanism research, Jane Atkinson set the stage for this approach by surveying a variety of ethnographies that she viewed as important to countering both the psychologizing of shamanism and the popular image of shamanism as a homogenous category (1992). Her review popularized the usage of "shamanisms" as a plural to highlight the diversity within what had previously been lumped under the singular shamanism. Yet, she questions whether merely providing an accurate image of local practices is enough to counter these trends. In her conclusion, she encourages anthropologists to "attend to the wide conversations both popular and academic, not only to devise new ways of being heard but also to engage reflexively these contemporary inventions" (Atkinson 1992, 321). Arguably, the rhetorical approach as outlined by DuBois and Atkinson resides at the center of anthropological thinking today with evolutionary schemes and grand theorization appearing rather old fashioned.

While few but not none within academia subscribe to Eliade's assertion that shamanism precedes culture and history, a similar approach reinvigorates earlier attempts to trace the source of shamanism. DuBois calls this the transcendent approach to shamanism (2011, 112-113). Running parallel to this paradigm is the cognitive approach to religion. This school of thought relies on prevailing theories of brain function and neurobiology to explain the similarities between the various spiritual systems labeled shamanism. The emphasis here is placed on the altered state of consciousness itself rather than any specific cultural features. Among these scholars, shamanism is often explored as a critical phase in the "evolution of human religious consciousness" (DuBois 2011, 113).

One such scholar is Michael Winkelman, an anthropologist with a penchant for neuroscience. He is among those scholars who still hold the work of Eliade in high regard, and much of his work is based on the assumed universality of shamanism. Yet, Winkelman's writing is sophisticated and often provides compelling arguments for his position. In addition, Winkelman's work is unique in its scope and the grandiose nature of his claims. For instance, in a 2015 article Winkelman argued that the ritualized displays common among chimpanzees was evidence of an evolutionary origin and function of shamanism. He posits that early hominids would have created a sense of group identity through these ritualized behaviors that in turn would have reinforced group cohesion and cooperation. He considers this system as a sort of proto-shamanism (my phrasing) that served as a social adaptation and a stage of human social evolution (Winkelman 2015). Oddly, this article features a mischaracterization of Claude Lévi-Strauss's position on totemism. While Lévi-Strauss concluded that totemism was a projection of structure onto nature, Winkelman cites him as supporting the idea of totemism as an innate feature of the human mind (Lévi-Strauss 1963; Winkelman 2015, 274). In another publication, Winkelman argues for a role of hallucinogens in the development of human consciousness. He explains that various fungal and plant hallucinogens would have provided neurotransmitter analogues that could have potentially enhanced cognition, providing an evolutionary feedback loop that promoted the survival of those both willing to and capable of consuming toxic plants and fungi (Winkelman 2013, 32).

One can see in Winkelman's writing a messianic attitude towards shamanism and hallucinogens. In the first article, Winkelman presents shamanism as an ancient social technology used to build the foundation of human culture and civilization. Ethnographic details that reveal the uniqueness of the world's shamanisms are excluded as they are seen to detract from claims of its universality. Similarly, positioning hallucinogens and their consumption as a point on the timeline of the evolution of human consciousness frames these substances as universally significant, especially in spiritual contexts. This ignores the historical taboos regarding their usage even among some followers of neoshamanism who consider hallucinogen usage to be an excess not necessary to proper shamanic practice (Znamenski 238, 2007).

Winkelman's position in this conversation on shamanism and hallucinogens is interesting in that typically the messianic perception is limited to those outside of academia. Consider Michael Harner, anthropologist turned shaman, who now instructs Westerners on the "ways of the shaman" or, regarding hallucinogens specifically, the work of Timothy Leary or Terrence McKenna, both of whom left the ivory tower to pursue their own esoteric goals. Arguably, Winkelman's attempts to rationalize shamanism and hallucinogen consumption is built on the premise that to bring hallucinogens from the periphery into the center requires an approach that does not challenge the status quo of knowledge production but adheres to it. This relies on a growing acceptance or tolerance at the least among academics towards the often unverifiable claims promoted by such scholars. Perhaps this is the result of postmodern attitudes skeptical of the monolithic nature of truth which are held by many in academia.

Medicalizing Indigeneity

This pattern of rationalization regarding shamanism and hallucinogen consumption feeds directly into the medicalization of indigenous spiritual practices. Returning to the history of shamanism as a Western concept, we can trace the roots of the medicalization paradigm. Some of the first academic literature on Siberian shamanism that reached the West, namely the ethnographies produced by the Jesup North Pacific Expedition, portrayed shamanism as "a culturally sanctioned mental disorder" (Znamenski 81, 2007). While it is no surprise that Western perspectives on indigenous spirituality would use the lens of medicine to categorize and explain them, it is important to note the particular context in which this perception arose. Specifically, the still misunderstood phenomenon of "arctic hysteria" framed how researchers and explorers viewed Siberian religious practices.

Descriptions of the peoples encountered by arctic explorers typically feature at least one instance of a local breaking down into a nervous fit. An account of one of Robert E. Peary's expeditions includes a description of a woman suffering from a mental breakdown in which she mimics various local wildlife. Among the Sakha of northeastern Siberia this sort of neurotic mimicry was so common that it had a word to describe those who suffered from it: *emeriak*. The accompanying term, *menerick*, was a more general word for insanity (Znamenski 83, 2007). These episodes also involved sitting or lying on the ground and muttering or singing while rocking or gesticulating wildly. Explanations include harsh climatic conditions, the accompanying malnutrition, specific traumas like loss of child or partner, general traumas like those brought on by colonization, or as a culturally sanctioned method to express emotions or desires typically considered inappropriate (Znamenski 2007, 79-94).

While their visual similarities were largely superficial, the ritualized gestures and movements of shamans appeared closely related to the common *menerick* or *emeriak*. More specifically, the explanations for arctic hysteria such as the harsh conditions were often used to explain the propensity for shamanic practice. This often placed the two phenomena in close contact with one another, even if just by association. This led to a theory of shamanism as a pathological condition at the societal level. An interesting point made by Znamenski suggests that the mental health issues attributed to locals were more of a reflection of the state of the exiled Russian intellectuals responsible for much of this theorization (2007, 96).

The second aspect of the medicalization of indigenous spiritual practices replaces the pathological view with a therapeutic explanation. Perhaps the most sophisticated view of shamanism from the early ethnographic record, the work of Sergei Shirokogoroff depicted shamans as not the product of mental illness but as a constructive reaction to it. To

Shirokogoroff, shamans played a role in the community by dispelling collective negative emotions through ritual. One can see parallels to Lévi-Strauss's theory of symbolic healing that highlighted the power of symbols and belief in the context of ritual (Lévi-Strauss 1963). Similar to Winkelman, Shirokogoroff was deeply sympathetic to the lifeways of the indigenous peoples he studied but still operated in the cultural context of his time. Although Shirokogoroff did much to rehabilitate the image of the Siberian shaman, he still categorized them through Western psychology.

Returning to the present, medical and psychological discussions have dominated the public sphere with great fanfare placed on the potential of hallucinogenic compounds to treat mental disorders such as depression, anxiety, PTSD, and addiction (Davis et al. 2019, 2021; Fecska, Bokor, and Winkelman 2016; Griffiths 2016; Li et al. 2021; Luoma et al. 2020 Palhano-Fontes et al. 2019; Sanches et al. 2016). The efficacy of such treatments has been recognized by the US FDA with two institutions receiving breakthrough therapy status for psilocybin therapies aimed at treatment resistant depression. This designation expedites the development and review of drugs recognized as a "substantial improvement over existing therapy methods" (U.S. Food and Drug Administration). Psilocybin trials have also been conducted to test their efficacy in treating anxiety, obsessive-compulsive disorders, anxiety and depression associated with life threatening illness, alcohol dependency, and tobacco dependence (Griffiths 2016; Thomas et al. 2017). MDMA, a compound often associated with classical psychedelics due to its similar effect on the 5HT2A receptor, has also been awarded breakthrough therapy status for its efficacy in treating PTSD (Araújo et al. 2015; Pixler 2017). LSD has also been shown to be a safe and effective treatment for mental disorders like chronic anxiety and depression (Li et al. 2021). These studies confirm that classical psychedelics are both safe and highly effective in treating a wide range of treatment resistant mental disorders. Ayahuasca has received less attention from the media, but its potential benefits possibly dwarf those of psilocybin. One benefit of ayahuasca over psilocybin or LSD is its relatively short duration of four hours compared to eight to twelve hours, respectively. (Palhano-Fontes et al. 2015, 2019; Sanches et al. 2016).

In a 2016 survey of ayahuasca's therapeutic potential, Ede Frecska, Petra Bokor, and Winkelman provide an overview of our knowledge of ayahuasca from a biopsychosociospiritual perspective. This approach recognizes the significance of spiritual well-being in the context of healing while also including a robust consideration of the most recent developments in neuroscience and psychology (Bishop 2009). Indeed, their coverage of the biochemical make-up of ayahuasca, its neuropharmacological mechanisms, subsequent physiological effects, and most recent brain imaging evidence can be dizzying to the laymen. But it is worth including an overview of this data to reflect the medical significance attributed to the ayahuasca brew from researchers with Winkelman's proclivities.

Like the other classical psychedelics, ayahuasca's hallucinatory effects are theorized to be the result of action on serotonin receptors (5-HT) in conjunction to interaction with a metabotropic glutamate receptor (mGlu2). I'll discuss the significance of this effect in addressing mental disorders like depression, anxiety, and addiction later, but ayahuasca is distinct from the other classical psychedelics in its action on sigma receptors (Sig-1R). This is significant in that the Sig-1R acts as a chaperone between the endoplasmic reticulum and mitochondria, aiding the transmission of signals between parts of the cell. This sort of support in communication is critical, especially in times of stress. When the ER is under stress, its ability to fold proteins properly is hampered. The accumulation of unfolded or misfolded proteins triggers what is known as the unfolded protein response (UPR). Parts of this response promote the survival of the cell by breaking down misfolded proteins, but other aspects trigger cell death. This process has been linked to Alzheimer's disease, Parkinson's disease, amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, bipolar disorder, atherosclerosis, diabetes, cancer, autoimmune disorders, and cardiovascular disorders. Research has suggested that Sig-1R enhances the elements of UPR that support cell survival. Additionally, Sig-1R aids in responding to oxidative stress as well as modulating immune system responses, inflammation specifically (Fecska, Bokor, and Winkelman 2016).

These combined impacts suggest agonists like DMT which increase the capacity of Sig-1R might have positive impacts on a wide range of diseases. Ayahuasca is particularly effective in its delivery of DMT in that MAO-A inhibitors present within ayahuasca promote the agonistic effect of DMT on Sig-1R rather than just allowing its oral digestion. The medical potential of ayahuasca is thus not limited to mental disorders such as depression and anxiety but possibly includes several physiological conditions (Fecska, Bokor, and Winkelman 2016).

Of course, on the basis of Winkelman's previous work, this study should be taken with a grain of salt. But the lengths in which Winkelman and his colleagues go to rationalize ayahuasca consumption is revealing. Now, the premises in which their claims rely on are supported by other publications, but beyond the neurological mechanisms they describe there is a lack of clinical evidence (Davis et al. 2018; Ruiz-Núñez et al. 2013). I do not have the background to honestly evaluate all of their speculations, but it is likely they're research is colored by their pre-arrived attitudes towards hallucinogenic healing. Yet still, this case is exemplary of the need for anthropologists to take seriously their informant's claims about medicinal plants, a principle championed by Mark Plotkin whom I'll discuss later. It is not my goal here to counter their claims nor support them, but rather to use this study as an example of how Westerners make sense of traditional hallucinogens through medicalization.

Intoxication and Spirituality

Throughout this paper, I have focused heavily on shamanism and its development as a construct. The purpose of this has been to elaborate on patterns that define Western interactions with indigenous spiritual systems. While I have primarily discussed shamanism through the lens of Western scholarship, my central interest is in examining hallucinogen consumption in the West as a unique, participatory form of antimodernism. But I am interested in a particular context rather than the general use of hallucinogens. By exploring neoshamanism generally, a term I use here to describe a diffuse group of Western spiritual practices that deploy rituals and techniques perceived as shamanic, a spiritual system comes into view that many hallucinogen users are attracted to or utilize to make sense of their experiences. It is worth noting that many practitioners of neoshamanism do not use hallucinogens and many who use hallucinogens do so outside of a spiritual context or at least do not refer to their practices as shamanic. What follows is a brief review of some significant literature on intoxicants and hallucinogenic spirituality.

The unique role intoxicants have played in human society has been written about extensively. Richard Rudgley's *Essential Substances: A Cultural History of Intoxicants in Society* remains an important text for those seeking to orient themselves in the sea of literature although there have been cultural developments worth including in an update (1993). Another survey text worth examining is the collection of essays included in *Drugs, Rituals and Altered States of Consciousness* which include contributions from the famous ethnobotanist Richard Evans Schultes and ayahuasca ethnographer Marlene Dobkin de Rios (Du Toit, 1977). For a phenomenological or transcendent perspective on intoxicating plants and fungi, *Hallucinogens and the Development of Culture: The Anthropology and Neurobiology of Ecstatic Experience* is worth a peruse. The included essays range from Winkelman's work on hallucinogens and the development of consciousness to speculative arguments on the possible influence of hallucinogens on various faith systems (Rush 2013).

Returning to Schultes, he has contributed greatly to our understanding of medicinal plants in the Amazon, particularly those hallucinogenic varieties of spiritual significance (1988; 1992). His role as a mentor to popular anthropologist Wade Davis and ethnobotanist Mark Plotkin has also been significant. The work of Plotkin will be considered in depth later. Schultes's focus on hallucinogenic plants made his work especially attractive to the pioneers of the psychedelic movement such as Timothy Leary and Aldous Huxley. Schultes even co-authored a book on hallucinogenic flora with Albert Hoffman, the first person to synthesize LSD as well as psilocybin (1979). A little known but perhaps more influential figure, who collaborated with both Hoffman and Schultes, is R. Gordon Wasson, an investment bank turned amateur ethnomycologist who helped bring hallucinogenic fungi to the attention of the public.

Wasson's interest in mushrooms was born from an illuminating experience with his Russian wife, Valentina, in which the latter picked, cooked, and ate a number of mushrooms found on a walk. Despite Wasson's fears, Valentina was unscathed. The couple decided that their respective attitudes towards fungus was a result of differing cultural conditioning. This led to Wasson's lifelong study of the beliefs and practices surrounding mushrooms in various cultures. Reportedly, one of Schultes's papers on psilocybe mushroom use in Oaxaca, Mexico published in the 1940s led Wasson to seek out the experience firsthand. While earlier researchers had collected specimens and observed the rituals surrounding the mushrooms, Wasson was unique in his interest to consume the sacrament in its local setting (Znamenski 2007, 122-123).

Wasson's experience with Mazatec *curandera* Maria Sabina was famously told in his 1957 *Life* article "Seeking the Magic Mushroom" (Znamenski 2007, 127). In his account, Wasson uses shaman and *curandera* interchangeably, reflecting the established universality of shamanism to scholars of the time. But contrary to the often dry and inaccessible language of previous writers, Wasson's telling was captivating and full of detail. His firsthand consumption of the mushrooms and the reporting of its effects captivated readers:

> We were never more wide awake, and the visions came whether our eyes were opened or closed. They emerged from the center of the field of vision, opening up as they came, now rushing, now slowly, at the pace that our will chose. They were vivid in color, always harmonious. They began with art motifs, angular such as might decorate carpets or textiles or wallpaper or the drawing board of an architect. Then they evolved into palaces with courts, arcades, gardens – resplendent palaces all laid over with semiprecious stones. Then I saw a mythological beast drawing a regal chariot. Later it was as though the walls of our house had dissolved, and my spirit had flown forth, and I was suspended in mid-air viewing landscapes of mountains, with camel caravans advancing slowly across the slopes, the mountains rising tier above tier to the very heavens. (Wasson 1957, 102, 109)

The efficacy of Wasson's prose is evident in how popular the region became to Western spiritual seekers, drawing in celebrities such as Mick Jagger, John Lennon, and Peter Townsend (Znamenski 2007, 128)

The session in which Wasson took part followed a typical pattern associated with shamanism in which the *curandera* and participants both consume the hallucinogen. The primary role of the *curandera* is to diagnose whatever ailments the client might be suffering from. This is accomplished by listening to the spirits of the consumed mushrooms as they are considered sentient in their own right (Znamenski 2007, 124-127). Marlene Dobkin de Rios observed a similar pattern in ayahuasca healing sessions among the urban poor of Iquitos, Peru (1972). This pragmatic approach to hallucinogenic healing often runs contrary to the motivations of Western seekers who commonly resort to hallucinogens as an exploration of mind (Znamenski 2007, 128).

In the article, Wasson also reviews the significance of mushrooms in various cultural settings, including Siberian ritual use of the *amanita muscaria* or fly agaric mushroom. In later work, Wasson theorized that psychoactive mushrooms played a significant role in the origin of religion. Specifically, he was interested in proving that the plant sacrament soma mentioned throughout the *Rig Veda* was not a plant but was indeed the fly agaric. Descriptions of the effects of soma, its growth habits, and the fact that its psychoactive component remains active within the urine of the consumer were all evidence to Wasson of the identity of soma. Furthermore, Wasson used ethnographic sources, folklore, literature, and archaeological finds to promote the theory that hallucinogenic mushrooms were the original source of divinity (1968). While this assertion is routinely criticized, though not universally, Wasson's theory regarding the identity of soma is still debated (Feeney 2010; Rudgley 1993, 47-63; Staal 2001).

Although he never promoted its use among Westerners, much to the disdain of counter culturalists like Timothy Leary, Wasson was one of the first to popularize the ritual use of hallucinogens (Znamenski 2007, 129). Despite this early popularization that often conflated spiritually motivated hallucinogen consumption and shamanism, the first promoters of neoshamanism eventually came to disapprove of the hallucinogenic method. For example, the work of Carlos Castaneda remains influential to many spiritual seekers looking for new techniques. While it has been established that Castaneda's work is primarily fiction, the archetype of the shaman in the form of Don Juan was a compelling framework for many spiritualists. Interestingly, over the course of the Don Juan series, the hallucinogens are replaced by esoteric techniques that resemble yoga, meditation, and visualization exercises (Znamenski 2007, 199). While I won't go further into the work of Castaneda, the flexibility in which he borrows beliefs and rituals from disparate cultures to construct his own spirituality is deeply characteristic of individualist systems of spirituality and relevant to the conversation on neoshamanism.

Modern Shamanism

Another forerunner who left hallucinogens behind is Michael Harner. Originally, Harner followed the path of many anthropologists of the 1950s and 1960s and sought out minimally contacted groups for study. Working with the Jivaro of the Amazon, Harner was more interested in representing the group holistically rather than examining their spirituality. Despite trying the brew later among the Conibo of Peru, he did not mention the ritual consumption of ayahuasca among both groups in any of his publications. Yet, Harner was not immune to the changing attitudes of the West towards hallucinogens and later became fascinated by ayahuasca spirituality among the Jivaro of the Amazon, even going as far to apprentice under a local practitioner. By the early 1970s, however, the fervor of the psychedelic era was wearing off. Harner began to study other shamanisms that relied on safer methods such as drumming, rattling, and chanting to achieve an altered state of consciousness. He also came to subscribe to Eliade's conception of shamanism as a universal religious phenomenon that was beyond culture. That is to say that in the view of Eliade and Harner, shamanism around the world was essentially the same when stripped of the specific cultural features that distinguish them (Znamenski 2007, 234-238).

Now utilizing safe shamanic techniques picked up from library research, Harner sought to bring these practices to the public as an antidote to the ills of modern living. While he began only teaching workshops, they were popular enough for Harner to set up a non-profit, now known as the Foundation for Shamanic Studies. The following year, Harner published *The Way of the Shaman*, a manual geared towards Westerners looking to learn the fundamentals of shamanism, what he refers to as Core Shamanism. Within this system, altered states of consciousness are reach through rapid and repetitive drumming. These states of consciousness are seen to enable a journey to the spirit world in which one can cultivated a relationship with their respective power animal or guardian spirit. Maintaining a connection with this entity is seen as important as it has the potential to protect and offer guidance (Znamenski 2007, 238-247).

It can be difficult to classify the myriad modern belief systems influenced by indigenous spirituality. For instance, phrases like "New Age" are exposed to be meaningless when deployed outside of a strict context. Joan B. Townsend uses the term Individualist to describe a variety of amorphous belief systems (2004). I find this designation useful as it captures the fluidity of modern spirituality. This phenomenon of piecing together one's spiritual beliefs on the basis of personal preference has been referred to as sheilaism (Bellah et al. 1985). Znamenski's field work among Western spiritual seekers reinforces the saliency of this pattern (2007, 248-256). Harner and those who adhere to Core Shamanism resent being labeled neoshamans as they view their practice as a methodology rather than a religion (Znamenski 2007, 245). Townsend distinguishes Core Shamanism from neoshamanism as the latter often relies on culturally specific symbols and archetypes though not exclusively from one milieu (2004). But even this distinction is rather arbitrary as it suggests that individuals can be sorted into either group. Rather, those spiritual seekers who utilize techniques perceived to be shamanic often do not limit themselves to a single system. Individual practitioners are dynamic subjects who largely resist categorization. They are a pragmatic group that oppose dogma and embrace fluidity (Znamenski 2007; Gearin 2015).

Hallucinogenic Neoshamanism and Ethical Concerns

While I have spent much time reviewing shamanism and its complicated historical trajectory, I want to focus on hallucinogenic neoshamanism and related ethical considerations for the remainder of this paper. While not all users of hallucinogens do so in a spiritual context, the consistency in which some of these compounds, particularly DMT, produce mystical experiences is remarkable (Davis et al. 2020; Griffiths et al. 2008, 2019). Although, one must be careful to not infer that hallucinogenic experiences necessarily dispel atheistic beliefs as noted by Wayne Glausser (2021). Perhaps a more likely explanation is that these compounds tend to magnify preexisting tendencies towards spirituality. Timothy Leary and Walter Pahnke's "Good Friday" experiment in which psilocybin was administered to ten divinity students, all of which except one described it is as one of the most spiritually significant moments of their lives (Doblin 1991; Pahnke 1966).

It is then no surprise that a significance number of hallucinogenic users turn to frameworks such as shamanism to guide and make sense of these experiences. Contrary to Harnerian shamanism, those who participate in hallucinogenic shamanism often rely heavily on the cosmology of indigenous communities, regardless of its historical authenticity. An admittedly loaded term, the concept of authenticity when deployed critically can be helpful in understanding the phenomenon of ayahuasca tourism. This refers to the practice of traveling abroad to experience an ayahuasca ritual in what is considered its original environment. While there are numerous groups who use ayahuasca in a ritual setting outside of South America, travelling to the home of ayahuasca is a pilgrimage of sorts for many (Fotiou 2020; Gearin 2015).

There is a wealth of ethnographies of ayahuasca consumption among Westerners. Sara Lewis has explored the relationship between spiritual crisis and personal growth that often defines the ayahuasca experience for many. This underscores the value of guidance either in the form of an *ayahuasquero* or *curandero* or a professional therapist as often the distress that accompanies an ayahuasca experience can be difficult to translate into healing (Lewis 2008). Alex K. Gearin work among Australian ayahuasca communities reveals the significance of individualism to many in the context of healing. He notes how the values associated with individualism such as autonomy and personal responsibility are often articulated through ritual activity (Gearin 2015). Arne Harms, on the other hand, argues that relationships to nature are prioritized among some ayahuasca users. This is seen to operate synergistically with other priorities such as healing, spiritual growth, and exploration of the mind (Harms 2021). In her examination of ayahuasca communities in both Australia and Peru, Evgenia Fotiou along with Gearin have explored purging, including vomiting, diarrhea, sweating, and sinus draining, as significant in relation to healing. This includes both symbolic attributions as well as beliefs in the physiological significance of bodily purging (Fotiou and Gearin 2019).

Other contributions have provided more critical conversations on ayahuasca neoshamanism. Winkelman has largely defended the practice, opposing characterizations of users as drug seekers. He argues that their motivations typically involve spiritual growth, healing, or contact with spirit entities of some form whether in the form of personified nature, God, or other more amorphous categories (Winkelman 2005). While few disagree that most users mean well, they examine the potential of negative, unintended consequences. These issues typically involve appropriation, commodification, scarcity, or a combination.

The issue of cultural appropriation has been of central importance to recent public conversations on multiculturalism. It can often be difficult to draw the line between appreciation or participation and appropriation on the other hand. The definition articulated by Matthias Krings is a useful starting point: “Appropriation means taking a cultural form, a symbolic representation, for example, out of one context and putting it into another, whereby shifts of meaning most likely occur" (2015, 17). This definition opposes earlier formulations that define appropriation strictly as the borrowing of cultural elements by a more powerful culture from a less powerful one. This neutral approach makes it easier to distinguish appropriations in which actual harm occurs from more benign ones, strengthening the case against such instances.

Some have theorized that the mechanism in which harm occurs is related to a violation of group intimacy. C. Thi Nguyen and Matthew Strohl argue that as shared cultural features and practices constitute a sense of community, appropriations of these elements are a disruption of a shared identity (2019). Erich Hatala Matthes, in response to this argument, worries that "the intimacy account doubles down on the boundary problem" (2018, 1003).[1] As Nguyen and Strohl's conception of wrongful appropriation requires group members to ask non-members to "refrain from appropriating a given element of the group's culture" (2019, 981), this requires an essentialist view on identity that does not hold up in the real world (Matthes 2018). Moreover, instances in which some members accept the borrowing of cultural features while others are in opposition are unable to be categorized as wrongful or appropriate based solely on the intimacy account of appropriation. This is evident in the diversity of opinions among indigenous communities regarding the use of their spiritual beliefs and practices by non-members (Pollan 2021; Wallis 2008; Znamenski 2007). Similarly, this approach relies on a concept of cultural property that ultimately breaks down when deployed universally (Matthes 2018).

In its place, Matthes presents an "oppression account" that limits the definition of wrongful appropriation to cases in "which they manifest and/or exacerbate inequality and marginalization" (2018, 1004). This framework is useful in its flexibility. Matthes uses the example of a white, female musical artist using and profiting off of traditionally Black styles

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[1] To avoid any confusion, it should be noted that Nguyen and Strohl intimacy account of wrongful appropriation was first presented at a 2018 conference in which Matthes participated.

without having to live with the social realities of that identity. While the issue of profit without compensation can appear to be a cultural property issue, the real harm to Matthes is the context in which this occurs, namely the absence Black female artists in mainstream media (2018, 1005). This can be viewed then as an instance in which an appropriation is a manifestation of an existing inequality, thereby reifying and normalizing this condition.

This framework is valuable when considering ayahuasca neoshamanism. Fotiou in particular has taken issue with what she considers to be the “erasure of indigenous peoples’ plights and injustices against them” through the process of romantic stereotyping (2016, 170). In particular Fotiou takes issue with the idealization of South American ayahuasca shamanism. This often ignores its history which is rooted in colonization and the horrors of the rubber boom (Taussig 1987). Additionally, the economic conditions that encourage locals to participate in ayahuasca tourism are often the result of the historical legacy of colonialism. Fotiou argues that a greater recognition of this process is essential to a more constructive interaction with indigenous spiritual systems like ayahuasca shamanism (2016).

The second issue, commodification, relates both to hallucinogenic neoshamanism as well as other approaches that do not utilize hallucinogens. Harner’s use of costly workshops to teach practitioners has come under criticism. In addition, the monetary awards his foundation presents to indigenous shamans can often appear overtly capitalistic (Wallis 2008). Fotiou also mentions that social effects brought by the market for ayahuasca tourism is places like Iquitos, Peru. Primarily, the demand for *ayahuasqueros* in the urban areas of South American draws many local healers away from their rural homes, leaving their communities without the specialized plant medicine knowledge they had previously provided (Fotiou 2020). Yet, one cannot ignore the economic benefits brought by tourism. While trying to avoid infringing on the autonomy of locals to make these sort of economic decisions, one can still hope they are able to do so on their own terms.

The last issue, scarcity, is a more direct and measurable harm. This relates only to those forms of neoshamanism that utilize hallucinogens traditionally associated with respective indigenous communities. Regarding ayahuasca, one wonders how sustainable the harvesting of its plant constituents, *p. viridis* and *b. caapi*, given the voracious appetite of spiritual seekers. This has become an issue with the peyote cactus that is used by the Native American Church (NAC), a syncretic faith that mixes elements of Christianity and traditional indigenous symbolism. This group has fought to gain legal access the peyote as a sacrament and often view outsider consumption as offensive, especially considering the orientation of the NAC which views peyote as a healing tool for the harms of colonialism (Callabrese 2001; Pollan 2021; Webb 2011). Additionally, the peyote cactus has a limited range in which it grows naturally. This is significant in that many in the NAC do not view artificially cultivated peyote or synthesized mescaline, peyotes active component, as spiritually animated. Thus, poaching of the peyote cactus represents an active attack on the faith of this group (Pollan 2021).

Shamans and Startups

I would like to conclude by reviewing the work of Mark Plotkin as an intersection of the topics reviewed. His work includes romantic views of shamanism and indigeneity in general. Like Harner, he also attempted to bring the spiritual tools of indigenous people to Western communities. But unlike Harner, Plotkin was directly involved in the formation of a pharmacological group that sought to patent and develop treatments based on indigenous plant knowledge. This attempt to medicalize indigenous knowledge is an interesting case study to apply the themes and history covered by this paper.

In *Tales of a Shaman's Apprentice*, ethnobotanist Mark Plotkin recounts his research in the Amazon. While more adventure novel than ethnography, Plotkin's captivating account provides a first-person perspective on the cultural transformation of Amazonian communities. Most importantly, Plotkin demonstrates the relationship between the prevalence of medicinal plant knowledge and degree of interaction with western religion and commodities. Plotkin argues that this process is leading to the loss of "thousands of years of accumulated human wisdom", critically in the area of medicinal plants (1993, 236).

Plotkin, as a student of Richard Evans Schultes, reproduces many of the transcendent arguments surrounding shamanism. Describing a formidable Wayana shaman, Plotkin states:

> He was one of the last surviving heirs to a tradition born thousands of years ago in the wilds of Eurasia. In about 4000 BC the Aryan peoples occupying what is now southern Iran developed a cult based on ritual consumption of a hallucinogenic mushroom called the fly agaric. Those who ate the fly agaric believed it allowed them to journey to worlds inhabited by spirits. When descendants of these peoples invaded Northern India two thousand years later, they carried their beliefs and customs with them. The mushroom cult flourished in its new home; the fly agaric and its mind-altering effects figure prominently in the sacred Hindu Hymns known as the Rigveda, composed about 1350 BC. From India the cult spread eastward to the shores of the Pacific. In northeast Asia, it developed into a nature-spirit religion known as shamanism, with its own rites, traditions, and worldview. (Plotkin 1993, 202)

As has been previously discussed, theories that suggest a singular origin for the world's shamanisms are often criticized as speculative. Even Richard Wasson's theory of the identify of soma as the fly agaric is included in this description as fact despite its shortcomings (Rudgley 1993). Plotkin's explanation for the lack of medical plant knowledge among the Yanomami as a result of reliance on shamanic modes of healing also appears simplistic. A 1996 survey directly contradicts Plotkin' assumption (Milliken & Albert).

Plotkin's contributions to the ethnobotanical record are more noteworthy. His documentation of the use of wild pepper as an additive to arrow poisons or curare has been confirmed to increase bioavailability thus intensifying the poison (Plotkin 1993, 106). While many additives to curare as well as psychoactive mixtures had been previously denounced as superstitious rather than scientific, this episode confirms the aptitude of indigenous traditions in identifying useful plant combinations. This raises an interesting point in the reluctance of many western ayahuasca users to tolerate additives in their brews.

Plotkin's report of his impromptu experience with *epena* or *yopo* is worth examining. Epena is a catch all term that describes psychoactive snuffs used among the Yanomami. While shapori or shamans use epena to interact with hekura, metaphysically complex non-human beings central to Yanomami cosmology. But epena is also consumed recreationally by the men of the community, gathering in pairs or groups to swap stories and tell jokes while intoxicated. Epena snuff is also utilized to increase talking while deciding on important issues or meeting with other tribes (Jokic 2015, 77).

While Plotkin's goal was to further investigate epena both regarding its botanical ingredients as well as its effects from a personal perspective, he unwittingly initiated an epena session within moments of entering the community he wished to work with. Mistaking his eagerness to demonstrate his knowledge of epena for an eagerness to have it blasted up his nostrils, an old, Yanomami shapori Plotkin describes as "slightly ominous" begins loading a pipe with epena (1993, 264). Plotkin is initially in a state of discomfort as snuffing can irritate the sensitive linings of the nostril and sinus. His head pounds yet the shapori gives him another hit. At this point, the euphoric effects of the snuff begin to settle in as Plotkin describes a sense of belonging and interconnectedness with the Yanomami community he was among. Plotkin mentions that various members of the tribe comforted him by patting his back or massaging his arms. He continues to take hits of the snuff and consequentially becomes more intoxicated after each. Plotkin then begins to hallucinate small figures dancing on the edge of his now expanded vision. After several large hits, Plotkin returns to a distressful state but an attentive shapori notices and again comforts him much as the others had earlier. At this point, Plotkin reports a great peace settling over himself, his new friends, and the surrounding jungle. Now enjoying a deep sense of wakeful relaxation and comfort, Plotkin reflects on the world's ills but with an overwhelming sense of his own agency and ability to make a difference. A few hits later and Plotkin feels an invigorated awareness of the surrounding ecosystem, reporting to hear crocodiles slide into the river and rain falling on distant mountains. Returning to his immediate surroundings and the dancing figures, Plotkin implores the shapori to their identity. He replies that they are hekura (1993, 264-266).

Plotkin's trip report highlights the importance of leadership within psychoactive experience narratives. Within these stories, our protagonist often enters a state of confusion, discomfort, or pain that is seen to be insurmountable. The intervention of another, often an experienced user who guides sessions, serves as the turning point for narrative to transition from nightmare to ecstasy. This can also relate to mental discomfort brought on by repetitive negative thinking. Often the interaction with another seems to break this thought pattern and allows the user to reintegrate negative thoughts in a constructive way. Additionally, Plotkin's experience documents the significance of sociality in the context of altered states of consciousness. Despite them being largely strangers, Plotkin felt a deep sense of solidarity with those who engaged with him during his epena session. Participants in neoshamanic rituals often reporting entering the space as strangers but leaving with a feeling of connectedness (Gearin 2015).

Following Plotkin's experience, he went on to help found Shaman Pharmaceuticals with the express goal of commercializing indigenous medicinal plants and earmarking some of the profits to go back to the communities in which the remedy originated. While Plotkin writes at the end of his book that proceedings are going swimmingly, the years that followed were unfriendly to this venture (1993, 286). Following a surprise denial of approval from the FDA for a drug aimed at treating diarrhea in AIDS patients which was based upon the Amazonian plant *sangre de grado*, the company left the pharmaceutical business to pursue herbal diet remedies (Pollack 1999). While the drug was eventually developed and approved, it is unlikely that the companies that bought the rights share the same commitment to profit sharing (Hammond 2014).

The failure of Shaman Pharmaceuticals underscores the difficulty in attempts to ethically bring indigenous knowledge to the West. While this case was focused on a medical rather than spiritual technology, the patenting of various hallucinogens in the context of therapy has been an issue as of late. Mason Marks and I. Glenn Cohen have written on the legal complexities of medicalizing hallucinogens. First, the status of many these compounds as schedule I which designates them as having no medical potential is anachronistic and contradicts a large body of research. As this is largely a political designation, reclassification of these drugs is a political venture rather than a scientific one. Another issue brought up is that patenting of these compounds could infringe access. Similar to Winkelman, there appears to be a paradigm in which acceptance of these compounds is best achieved through medicalization. However, the capitalist framework in which this occurs could lead to the emergence of gatekeepers that manipulate patent law to corner the market. One model promoted by Marks and Cohen is being developed in Oregon. This approach licenses a number of centers to administer psilocybin treatments to interested parties. More importantly, patients would not require a medical diagnosis, cutting out the need to medicalize these compounds (Cohen and Marks 2021).

Conclusion

Future research on this topic would benefit from a deeper examination of the attitudes and beliefs of Western users of hallucinogens, both in spiritual and non-spiritual contexts. However, given the diffuse nature of this community and the illegality of their behaviors, it can be difficult to gain access to these groups as well as provide a holistic image of this sub-culture. This is why some researchers have instead turned to online forums such as Reddit or the Vaults of Erowid, the former consisting of a number of sub-forums and the latter dedicated to recording hallucinogenic experiences (Coyle, Presti, and Baggot 2012; Duxbury 2018; Lea, Amada, and Jungaberle 2020; Orsolini et al. 2020; Pestana, Beccaria, and Petrilli 2021). In studying first-hand accounts of hallucinogenic experiences, these studies provide an important image of Western hallucinogen consumption.

The West's relationship with the world's shamanisms and altered states of consciousness as healing can be viewed through the lens of Hegelian dialectics. Formulated in the common form of thesis-antithesis-synthesis – though not Hegel's original phrasing – this model can be deployed to a number of social phenomena though it is not without its critiques and subtleties. For my own usage, it is best considered as an imperfect model, a mere simulacrum of the social ecosystem I've attempted to describe. But I find it is a helpful visualization tool in mapping a pattern of relationships between the West and the indigenous other.

We might consider the Enlightenment perspective of indigeneity to formulate the thesis in this example. This is defined by a deep skepticism of native beliefs and practices, a confident belief in the supremacy of industrialized living, and a general absence of inherent value attributed to their existence. In the antithesis we find the Romantic, anti-modernist perspective on indigenous life. The previous pattern of thought is turned on its head. The skepticism is now leveled towards one’s own lifeways. The feeling that we have left Eden and the gatekeepers are those individuals we had previously devalued and dominated breeds a deep anxiety. From my research, a synthesis of sorts is emerging that features spirituality defined by syncretism and the medicalization of the hallucinogens that some Westerner’s imagined to be central to the return to the Garden. Problematically, this is accompanied by an idealized image of indigenous life that often masks the historical wrongs and the continued injustices they face. I believe that a robust understanding of the conditions that led to this situation is a prerequisite to forging a respectful and mutually beneficial relationship between Western spiritual seekers and the peoples they seek to emulate.

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