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# Psychoactive Substances in Ritual and Religion

According to the theory of the 'entheogen' origin of religions, man would originally have known the psychoactive properties of specific plants, and religions would be based on the visions produced by these plants and substances ('entheogens') derived from them. Wasson et al. (1986) presented this theory on the basis of significant examples in ancient Indian religion (Vedic ritual) and ancient Greek religion (Eleusian mysteries).\* The theory has become of some inter-

est to a larger public, but has otherwise received relatively little attention, except in discussions of concrete issues such as R.G. Wasson's identification of the Soma plant of ancient Vedic ritual with a hallucinogenic (entheogen) mushroom – which was accepted by some (cf. Staal 2001) and contested by others (cf. Nyberg 1995).

There are examples from other religious and cultural contexts where the use of psychoactive substances is not original but provides a shortcut in vision quests etc. on which others embark without making use of them (cf. Nyberg 1995 and his entirely different view on the Siberian fly-agaric which plays a major role in Wasson's theory). Some of the substances, such

as tobacco, are currently well known for their recreational use, but elsewhere have been employed in serious shamanistic contexts, such as in rituals to contact forefathers (Wilbert 1972). A large part of the shamanistic 'experience' of contacting forefathers would seem to be either a product of cultural construction (cf. Katz 1983), or due to specific psycho-physiological preparations which recreational users of tobacco lack, or a combination of both.

The contrasts and controversies briefly outlined above suggest that not only the theories, but also the primary data are problematic, and that they are to be considered by specialists in various domains and disciplines, including anthropology, philology, religious science, archaeology,

ethno-botany, ethno-pharmacology, plant systematics, pharmacognosy, and psychophysiology.

The purpose of the 'Psychoactive substances in ritual and religion' symposium is to bring together various disciplines that take on or touch on ethno-botany and ethno-pharmacology. It will deal with specific cases of the ritual or religious use of plants or substances, or even of psycho-physiological preparations (such as fasting and staying awake) that do not require such substances. Contributors may address one or more questions such as:

- What is the identity of the plant or substance used in the religion or ritual?
- Are the plants or substances known to have relevant experimental effects,

e.g. hallucinogenic, stimulant, anti-depressant?

- If no direct botanical or chemical identification is possible, which descriptions of the plants, substances, effects and experiences are available which may be conducive to identification?
- Which contexts, procedures, devices can be identified to contribute to the conceptual and emotional construction of experiences associated with the plant or substance? <

## Note >

- \* For full references to the mentioned publications, you may contact the organizers.

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