

# rites, trances, hallucinogens

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Continuing to explore various prehistoric puzzles, my Recommended Reading for today is 0019. (BBC 25.11.2020) California cave depicts hallucinogenic plant, something that I came across more than five months ago, and copy-pasted for future reference. What makes it so interesting? Because it reminds us of the use of psychedelic substances in very ancient rites and ceremonies.

Consider shamanism, which used to be widespread (and perhaps still survives) among the hunting-and-gathering tribal peoples of north-central Asia, Siberia, and Alaska. In this variant of totemism, the key figure is the shaman (from *šamán*, perhaps of Tungusic origin), who as the embodiment and the human form of the clan totem (from whom the entire kinship group believes itself to be descended) is capable of traveling back and forth between the present and the other world. While here among us, in the course of a religious rite or ceremonial he sings and dances to reach a state of ecstasy (*vecd ve istiğrak hali*), which further evolves into a trance whereas far as the congregation can tell the shaman is unconscious, nor responding to any attempt to communicate with him. Eventually he wakes up, and tells of having assumed the shape of the clan totem, i.e. as a wolf or owl or eagle having run or flown off to join the world of the dead, communicated with our ancestral spirits, and then returned to life.

So much is anthropological observation; how it happens — what enables the shaman to achieve such a trance-like state — is another. Is it possible that the shaman is swept away by nothing other than his own passion? Or could it be that he is practising some kind of self-hypnosis? Or else, did they (also) use certain hallucinogenic plants to trigger, facilitate or accelerate the process? To learn about them (for example, the peyote cactus that appears to have been used by Native Americans since approximately 6000 years ago) would have come easily, given how many hundred thousand years the genus *Homo* spent hunting and gathering — or a few million years if we include our hominin predecessors — all of which adds up to, in Clive Ponting's words, ninety-nine percent of human history.

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All such possibilities are either stated or implied by Mircea Eliade in *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy* (1951), and as for drugs, we do know that Eliade himself used them, starting with opium during his time in India, then moving to passion flower extracts, methamphetamine and mescaline in the course of his existential crisis and clinical depression in the late 1940s. In recent decades more and more attention has been devoted to this “chemical” dimension of the human experience, giving rise to both scholarly explorations (see, for example, Mary Kilbourne Matossian, *Poisons of the Past: Molds, Epidemics, and History*, revised edition 1991, or Richard Evans Schultes, Albert Hofmann and Christian Ratsch, *Plants of the Gods: Their Sacred, Healing, and Hallucinogenic Powers*, 2001) and more of a pop-shamanistic literature (e.g. Michael J. Harner (ed), *Hallucinogens and Shamanism*; Michael Harner, *Cave and Cosmos: Shamanic Encounters with Another Reality*). Let's turn to fiction. In Jean Auel's *Earth's Children* series the last volume is titled *The Land of the Painted Caves*, which is how the anonymous peoples who created Altamira and Lascaux might have called the whole region. Ayla, Jean Auel's female super-heroine, is an acolyte of a woman who is referred to only as the First, who is training her, Ayla, to become a Zelandoni, a spiritual leader of the People of the Ninth Cave. In the process Ayla has two psychedelic experiences with a moderate and then a very powerful psychedelic substance, which induces a long coma and nearly kills her. She eventually wakes and continues with her apprenticeship.

It is against this broad background that 0019.(BBC 25.11.2020) California cave depicts hallucinogenic plant should be situated. There is a site in southern California called the Pinwheel Cave where the wall paintings made by Native Americans are only around 400 years old (i.e. done in the late-16th or early-17th centuries, when European colonisation of North America had not even begun to take its first steps). Now it has emerged through further study that the botanical remains found in the cave are the *Datura* plant, while some of the paintings on the walls also show the same plant's flowering and unfurling process. The *Datura* is known to have been “used historically for its psychoactive effects,” so that these findings do present “the first clear evidence for the ingestion of hallucinogens at a rock art site.” The cave is likely to have been a communal area, so that the rock art could have been “setting the scene” and “acting as visual catalysts” for such communal experiences. Ayla's story seems to have come full circle.