Anthropology of Psychedelics

Flesh of the Gods. The Ritual Use of Hallucinogens. PETER T. FURST, Ed. Praeger, New York, 1972. xvi, 304 pp., illus. $10.

This is a collection of ten excellent essays on hallucinogens. Each essay stands on its own merits. The essays are informative, but they do not combine to produce anything more than a collection of ten good articles printed together.

In a long introduction, Peter Furst says that the book is intended "to provide the psychedelic phenomenon with some of its essential cultural and historical dimensions" (p. xv). A statement in the introduction (p. viii) addresses a principal concern of several of the articles:

> Anthropologist Weston La Barre (whose approach to the origins of religion is thoroughly naturalistic and strongly oriented toward the Freudian view of man) attributes this phenomenon to a kind of cultural programming for personal ecstatic experience reaching back to the American Indian's ideological roots in the shamanistic religion of the Upper Paleolithic and Mesolithic hunting and gathering cultures of northeastern Asia. If La Barre is right —and the cumulative evidence tends to support him—this would take the practice and, more important, its philosophical underpinnings back at least fifteen or twenty thousand years, an estimate that if anything may be too conservative.

Evidence that psychotropic plants were used in the Old World in ancient times is provided by the two articles by R. Gordon Wasson, "The divine mushroom of immortality" and "What was the Soma of the Aryans?" Wasson is convinced that Soma was a mushroom known as the fly agaric, *Amanita muscara.* He believes also that its use began in Siberia with hunting and gathering shamans and from there spread south to India, thence west to the Mediterranean and to Europe.

The essay "Ritual use of *Cannabis sativa* L.: a historical-ethnographic survey" by William A. Emboden, Jr., adds significantly to the time perspective for Old World use of psychedelics, suggesting that the use of *Cannabis* dates back perhaps 6000 years. The record of the widespread use of marihuana in Africa and its ritual use in Mexico will come as a surprise to many. James W. Fernandez reports that the Fang people of Gabon use four narcotics with hallucinogenic properties in their Bwiti religion. These are *Tabernanthe iboga, Alchornea floribunda, Elaeophorbia drupifera,* and *Cannabis sativa.*

As Furst writes in the introduction (p. viii),

> Although . . . the Old World probably contains no fewer hallucinogenic species than the New, it is a fact that the New World outstrips the Old by ten to one in the number actually employed by its human inhabitants.

Beginning with research into the use of peyote (*Lophophora williamsii*) and other plants used in the peyote ceremony (1937) in Oklahoma, Richard Evans Schultes has continued and expanded his field research through Mexico, Central America, and tropical South America until he has become the unquestioned authority on the psychotomimetic plants of the New World. His article "Hallucinogens in the Western Hemisphere" is a valuable summary. Schultes reports that hallucinogens occur in at least ten different plant families and at least 30 different species. He identifies and explains the uses of plants from Canada to Chile. This is a marvelously succinct, yet comprehensive, review.

In his report entitled "Tobacco and shamanistic ecstacy among the Warao Indians of Venezuela," Johannes Wilbert describes the methods by which tobacco becomes a psychotomimetic substance for Warao shamans. He concludes with a comparison of tobacco and other hallucinogens and joins La Barre and Furst in seeing "an archaic shamanistic substratum underlying and to some extent uniting all or most aboriginal American Indian cultures" (p. 83). Gerardo Reichel-Dolmatoff in his article on *Banisteriopsis caapi,* a hallucinogen employed by the Tukano Indians of the Amazon region of Colombia, devotes a large part of his space to an analysis of the symbolism of the visions produced by the drug and reproduced on ceremonial houses. Most could be classified as related to procreation.

Douglas Sharon's article entitled "The San Pedro cactus in Peruvian folk healing" impressed me especially because Sharon does not seem as eager to depict a purely aboriginal religion as some of the other authors are. Even though he became an assistant shaman or curandero adept in the use of the hallucinogenic cactus *Trichocereus pachanoi,* he recognizes that "contemporary folk-healing practices in northern Peru are syncretic in nature, combining many Christian elements with older beliefs surviving from pre-European times" (p. 115). In contrast is the article by Furst on the peyote religion of the Huichol of Mexico. Writes Furst (p. 137):

> La Barre . . . has suggested that the contemporary Huichol peyote rituals are "probably the closest extant to the pre-Columbian Mexican rite," a judgment that my own studies confirm. . . . In any event, the symbolic religious complex that has the peyote quest as its sacred center appears to be the only survival on a major scale of relatively pure Indian religion and ceremonial, without substantial admixture of Catholic elements, in Mexico today.

I suppose any argument is blocked by his use of "relatively pure" and "substantial." Lumholtz (1898 to 1904), Diguet (1907), Klineberg (1934), and Zingg (1938) provide evidence to justify saying that the Huichol, like the Peruvians, combine many Christian elements in various ways with peyotism, however.

OMER C. STEWART
Department of Anthropology, University of Colorado, Boulder

Historical Lectures

Science and Society, 1600–1900. PETER MATHIAS, Ed. Cambridge University Press, New York, 1972. viii, 166 pp. + plates. $10.50.

In 1968, the distinguished Oxford economic historian Peter Mathias was asked to organize a set of lectures on the subject of "science and society." The six talks that resulted are reproduced with full bibliographical apparatus to form this book. It is something of a tribute to the discipline of the history of science that such a group of informative and respectable talks on this well-worn theme can be gathered without resort to the standard, dreadful set of clichés. Yet any editor's effort to make a coherent entity out of these disparate talks would be doomed from the start. There is still no consensus on which problems of the "external relations of science" require most attention. Hence, although one may admire individual essays and marvel at the variety of topics subsumed under the title, this book does not provide a balanced picture of the state of the art today.

The most sophisticated talk opens the book with a synthesis of recent discussions pertaining to the emergence of science in 17th-century England. After summarizing the results of R. K. Merton's classic study of the Puritanism-science ethos, P. M. Rattansi skillfully grafts onto it the more recent