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# Food Of The Gods

Terence McKenna

*Food*

OF THE

*Gods*

*The SEARCH for the  
ORIGINAL TREE  
of KNOWLEDGE*

A RADICAL HISTORY OF PLANTS,  
DRUGS AND HUMAN EVOLUTION

TERENCE McKENNA



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**TRUE HALLUCINATIONS**

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# **INTRODUCTION: A MANIFESTO FOR NEW THOUGHT ABOUT DRUGS**

A specter is haunting planetary culture—the specter of drugs. The definition of human dignity created by the Renaissance and elaborated into the democratic values of modern Western civilization seems on the point of dissolving. The major media inform us at high volume that the human capacity for obsessional behavior and addiction has made a satanic marriage with modern pharmacology, marketing, and high-speed transportation. Previously obscure forms of chemical use now freely compete in a largely unregulated global marketplace. Whole governments and nations in the Third World are held in thrall by legal and illegal commodities promoting obsessional behavior.

This situation is not new, but it is getting worse. Until quite recently international narcotics cartels were the obedient creations of governments and intelligence agencies that were searching for sources of “invisible” money with which to finance their own brand of institutionalized obsessional behavior.<sup>1</sup> Today, these drug cartels have evolved, through the unprecedented rise in the demand for cocaine, into rogue elephants before whose power even their creators have begun to grow uneasy.<sup>2</sup>

We are beset by the sad spectacle of “drug wars” waged by governmental institutions that usually are paralyzed by lethargy and inefficiency or are in transparent collusion with the international drug cartels they are publicly pledged to destroy.

No light can penetrate this situation of pandemic drug use and abuse unless we undertake a hard-eyed reappraisal of our present situation and an examination of some old, nearly forgotten, patterns of drug-related experience and behavior. The importance of this task cannot be overestimated. Clearly the self-administration of psychoactive substances, legal and illegal, will be increasingly a part of the future unfolding of global culture.

## **AN AGONIZING REAPPRAISAL**

Any reappraisal of our use of substances must begin with the notion of habit, “a settled tendency or practice.” Familiar, repetitious, and largely unexamined, habits are simply the things that we do. “People,” says an old adage, “are creatures of habit.” Culture is largely a matter of habit, learned from parents and those around us and then slowly modified by shifting conditions and inspired innovations.

Yet, however slow these cultural modifications may seem, when contrasted with the slower-than-glaciers modification of species and ecosystems, culture presents a spectacle of wild and continuous novelty. If nature represents a principle of economy, then culture surely must exemplify the principle of innovation through excess.

When habits consume us, when our devotion to them exceeds the culturally defined norms, we label them as obsessions. We feel, in such situations, as though the uniquely human dimension of free will has somehow been



violated. We can become obsessed with almost anything: with a behavior pattern such as reading the morning paper or with material objects (the collector), land and property (the empire builder), or power over other people (the politician).

While many of us may be collectors, few of us have the opportunity to indulge our obsessions to the point of becoming empire builders or politicians. The obsessions of the ordinary person tend to focus on the here-and-now, on the realm of immediate gratification through sex, food, and drugs. An obsession with the chemical constituents of foods and drugs (also called metabolites) is labeled an addiction.

Addictions and obsessions are unique to human beings. Yes, ample anecdotal evidence supports the existence of a preference for intoxicated states among elephants, chimpanzees, and some butterflies.<sup>13</sup> But, as when we contrast the linguistic abilities of chimpanzees and dolphins with human speech, we see that these animal behaviors are enormously different from those of humans.

Habit. Obsession. Addiction. These words are signposts along a path of ever-decreasing free will. Denial of the power of free will is implicit in the notion of addiction, and in our culture, addictions are viewed seriously—especially exotic or unfamiliar addictions. In the nineteenth century the opium addict was the “opium fiend,” a description that harkened back to the idea of a demonic possession by a controlling force from without. In the twentieth century, the addict as a person possessed has been replaced with the notion of addiction as disease. And, with the notion of addiction as disease, the role of free will is finally reduced to the vanishing point. After all, we are not responsible for the diseases that we may inherit or develop.

Today, however, human chemical dependence plays a more conscious role than ever before in the formation and maintenance of cultural values.

Since the middle of the nineteenth century and with ever-greater speed and efficiency, organic chemistry has placed into the hands of researchers, physicians, and ultimately everyone an endless cornucopia of synthetic drugs. These drugs are more powerful, more effective, of greater duration, and in some cases, many times more addictive than their natural relatives. (An exception is cocaine, which, although a natural product, when refined, concentrated, and injected is particularly destructive.)

The rise of a global information culture has led to the ubiquity of information on the recreational, aphrodisiacal, stimulating, sedative, and psychedelic plants that have been discovered by inquisitive human beings living in remote and previously unconnected parts of the planet. At the same time that this flood of botanical and ethnographic information arrived in Western society, grafting other cultures' habits onto our own and giving us greater choices than ever, great strides were being made in the synthesis of complex organic molecules and in the understanding of the molecular machinery of genes and heredity. These new insights and technologies are contributing to a very different culture of psychopharmacological engineering. Designer drugs such as MDMA, or Ecstasy, and anabolic steroids used by athletes and teenagers to stimulate muscle development are harbingers of an era of ever more frequent and effective pharmacological intervention in how we look, perform, and feel.

The notion of regulating, on a planetary scale, first hundreds and then thousands of easily produced, highly sought after, but illegal synthetic substances is appalling to anyone who hopes for a more open and less regimented future.

## **AN ARCHAIC REVIVAL**

This book will explore the possibility of a revival of the Archaic—or preindustrial and preliterate—attitude toward community, substance use, and nature—an attitude that served our nomadic prehistoric ancestors long and well, before the rise of the current cultural style we call “Western.” The Archaic refers to the Upper Paleolithic, a period seven to ten thousand years in the past, immediately preceding the invention and dissemination of agriculture. The Archaic was a time of nomadic pastoralism and partnership, a culture based on cattle-raising, shamanism, and Goddess worship.

I have organized the discussion in a roughly chronological order, with the last and most future-oriented sections taking up and recasting the Archaic themes of the early chapters. The argument proceeds along the lines of a pharmacological pilgrim’s progress. Thus I have called the four sections of the book “Paradise,” “Paradise Lost,” “Hell,” and, hopefully not too optimistically, “Paradise Regained?” A glossary of special terms appears at the end of the book.

Obviously, we cannot continue to think about drug use in the same old ways. As a global society, we must find a new guiding image for our culture, one that unifies the aspirations of humanity with the needs of the planet and the individual. Analysis of the existential incompleteness within us that drives us to form relationships of dependency and addiction with plants and drugs will show that at the dawn of history, we lost something precious, the absence of which has made us ill with narcissism. Only a recovery of the relationship that we evolved with nature through use of psychoactive plants before the fall into history can offer us hope of a humane and open-ended future.

Before we commit ourselves irrevocably to the chimera of a drug-free culture purchased at the price of a complete

jettisoning of the ideals of a free and democratic planetary society, we must ask hard questions: Why, as a species, are we so fascinated by altered states of consciousness? What has been their impact on our esthetic and spiritual aspirations? What have we lost by denying the legitimacy of each individual's drive to use substances to experience personally the transcendental and the sacred? My hope is that answering these questions will force us to confront the consequences of denying nature's spiritual dimension, of seeing nature as nothing more than a "resource" to be fought over and plundered. Informed discussion of these issues will give no comfort to the control-obsessed, no comfort to know-nothing religious fundamentalism, no comfort to beige fascism of whatever form.

The question of how we, as a society and as individuals, relate to psychoactive plants in the late twentieth century, raises a larger question: how, over time, have we been shaped by the shifting alliances that we have formed and broken with various members of the vegetable world as we have made our way through the maze of history? This is a question that will occupy us in some detail in the chapters to come.

The Ur-myth of our culture opens in the Garden of Eden, with the eating of the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge. If we do not learn from our past, this story could end with a planet toxified, its forests a memory, its biological cohesion shattered, our birth legacy a weed-choked wasteland. If we have overlooked something in our previous attempts to understand our origins and place in nature, are we now in a position to look back and to understand, not only our past, but our future, in an entirely new way? If we can recover the lost sense of nature as a living mystery, we can be confident of new perspectives on the cultural adventure that surely must lie ahead. We have the opportunity to move away from the gloomy historical nihilism that

characterizes the reign of our deeply patriarchal, dominator culture. We are in a position to regain the Archaic appreciation of our near-symbiotic relationship with psychoactive plants as a wellspring of insight and coordination flowing from the vegetable world to the human world.

The mystery of our own consciousness and powers of self-reflection is somehow linked to this channel of communication with the unseen mind that shamans insist is the spirit of the living world of nature. For shamans and shamanic cultures, exploration of this mystery has always been a credible alternative to living in a confining materialist culture. We of the industrial democracies can choose to explore these unfamiliar dimensions now or we can wait until the advancing destruction of the living planet makes all further exploration irrelevant.

## **A NEW MANIFESTO**

The time has therefore come, in the great natural discourse that is the history of ideas, thoroughly to rethink our fascination with habitual use of psychoactive and physioactive plants. We have to learn from the excesses of the past, especially the 1960s, but we cannot simply advocate “Just say no” any more than we can advocate “Try it, you’ll like it.” Nor can we support a view that wishes to divide society into users and nonusers. We need a comprehensive approach to these questions that encompasses the deeper evolutionary and historical implications.

The mutation-inducing influence of diet on early humans and the effect of exotic metabolites on the evolution of their neurochemistry and culture is still unstudied territory. The early hominids’ adoption of an omnivorous diet and their

discovery of the power of certain plants were decisive factors in moving early humans out of the stream of animal evolution and into the fast-rising tide of language and culture. Our remote ancestors discovered that certain plants, when self-administered, suppress appetite, diminish pain, supply bursts of sudden energy, confer immunity against pathogens, and synergize cognitive activities. These discoveries set us on the long journey to self-reflection. Once we became tool-using omnivores, evolution itself changed from a process of slow modification of our physical form to a rapid definition of cultural forms by the elaboration of rituals, languages, writing, mnemonic skills, and technology.

These immense changes occurred largely as a result of the synergies between human beings and the various plants with which they interacted and coevolved. An honest appraisal of the impact of plants on the foundations of human institutions would find them to be absolutely primary. In the future, the application of botanically inspired steady-state solutions, such as zero population growth, hydrogen extraction from seawater, and massive recycling programs, may help reorganize our societies and planet along more holistic, environmentally aware, neo-Archaic lines.

The suppression of the natural human fascination with altered states of consciousness and the present perilous situation of all life on earth are intimately and causally connected. When we suppress access to shamanic ecstasy, we close off the refreshing waters of emotion that flow from having a deeply bonded, almost symbiotic relationship to the earth. As a consequence, the maladaptive social styles that encourage overpopulation, resource mismanagement, and environmental toxification develop and maintain themselves. No culture on earth is as heavily narcotized as the industrial West in terms of being inured to the

consequences of maladaptive behavior. We pursue a business-as-usual attitude in a surreal atmosphere of mounting crises and irreconcilable contradictions.

As a species, we need to acknowledge the depth of our historical dilemma. We will continue to play with half a deck as long as we continue to tolerate cardinals of government and science who presume to dictate where human curiosity can legitimately focus its attention and where it cannot. Such restrictions on the human imagination are demeaning and preposterous. The government not only restricts research on psychedelics that could conceivably yield valuable psychological and medical insights, it presumes to prevent their religious and spiritual use, as well. Religious use of psychedelic plants is a civil rights issue; its restriction is the repression of a legitimate religious sensibility. In fact, it is not a religious sensibility that is being repressed, but *the* religious sensibility, an experience of *religio* based on the plant-human relationships that were in place long before the advent of history.

We can no longer postpone an honest reappraisal of the true costs and benefits of habitual use of plants and drugs versus the true costs and benefits of suppression of their use. Our global culture finds itself in danger of succumbing to an Orwellian effort to bludgeon the problem out of existence through military and police terrorism directed toward drug consumers in our own population and drug producers in the Third World. This repressive response is largely fueled by an unexamined fear that is the product of misinformation and historical ignorance.

Deep-seated cultural biases explain why the Western mind turns suddenly anxious and repressive on contemplating drugs. Substance-induced changes in consciousness dramatically reveal that our mental life has physical foundations. Psychoactive drugs thus challenge

the Christian assumption of the inviolability and special ontological status of the soul. Similarly, they challenge the modern idea of the ego and its inviolability and control structures. In short, encounters with psychedelic plants throw into question the entire world view of the dominator culture.

We will come across this theme of the ego and the dominator culture often in this reexamination of history. In fact, the terror the ego feels in contemplating the dissolution of boundaries between self and world not only lies behind the suppression of altered states of consciousness but, more generally, explains the suppression of the feminine, the foreign and exotic, and transcendental experiences. In the prehistoric but post-Archaic times of about 5000 to 3000 B.C., suppression of partnership society by patriarchal invaders set the stage for suppression of the open-ended experimental investigation of nature carried on by shamans. In highly organized societies that Archaic tradition was replaced by one of dogma, priestcraft, patriarchy, warfare and, eventually, "rational and scientific" or dominator values.

To this point I have used the terms "partnership" and "dominator" styles of culture without explanation. I owe these useful terms to Riane Eisler and her important re-visioning of history, *The Chalice and the Blade*.<sup>4</sup> Eisler has advanced the notion that "partnership" models of society preceded and later competed with, and were oppressed by, "dominator" forms of social organization. Dominator cultures are hierarchical, paternalistic, materialistic, and male-dominated. Eisler believes that the tension between the partnership and dominator organizations and the overexpression of the dominator model are responsible for our alienation from nature, from ourselves, and from each other.



Eisler has written a brilliant synthesis of the emergence of human culture in the ancient Near East and the unfolding political debate concerning the feminizing of culture and the need to overcome patterns of male dominance in creating a viable future. Her analysis of gender politics raises the level of debate beyond those who have so shrilly hailed and decried this or that ancient “matriarchy” or “patriarchy.” *The Chalice and the Blade* introduces the notion of “partnership societies” and “dominator societies” and uses the archaeological record to argue that over vast areas and for many centuries the partnership societies of the ancient Middle East were without warfare and upheaval. Warfare and patriarchy arrived with the appearance of dominator values.

## **THE DOMINATOR INHERITANCE**

Our culture, self-toxified by the poisonous by-products of technology and egocentric ideology, is the unhappy inheritor of the dominator attitude that alteration of consciousness by the use of plants or substances is somehow wrong, onanistic, and perversely antisocial. I will argue that suppression of shamanic gnosis, with its reliance and insistence on ecstatic dissolution of the ego, has robbed us of life’s meaning and made us enemies of the planet, of ourselves, and our grandchildren. We are killing the planet in order to keep intact the wrongheaded assumptions of the ego-dominator cultural style.

It is time for change.



# I PARADISE



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# 1

## SHAMANISM: SETTING THE STAGE



Raongi sat still in the fading light of the fire. He felt his body flex deep within in ways that reminded him of the gulping of an eel. As he formed this thought, an eel's head, oversized and bathed in electric blue, appeared obediently in the darkened space behind his eyelids.

"Mother spirit of the first waterfall . . ."

"Grandmother of the first rivers . . ."

"Show yourself, show yourself."

Responding to the voices, the darkened space behind the now slowly spinning eel apparition filled with sparks; waves of light leaped higher and higher, accompanied by a roar of increasing intensity.

"It is the first *maria*." The voice is that of Mangi, the elder shaman of the village of Jarocamena. "It is strong. So strong."

Mangi is silent as the visions close over them. They are on the brink of Venturi, the real world, the blue zone. The sound of falling rain outside is unrecognizable. There is the

shuffling of dry leaves mingled with the sound of distant bells. Their tingling seems more like light than sound.

• • •

Until relatively recently, the practices of Mangi and her remote Amazonian tribe were typical of religious practice everywhere. Only in the last several millennia have theology and ritual graduated to more elaborate—and not necessarily more serviceable—forms.

## **SHAMANISM AND ORDINARY RELIGION**

When I arrived in the Upper Amazon in early 1970, I had just spent several years living in Asian societies. Asia is a place where the shattered shells of castoff religious ontologies litter the dusty landscape like the carapaces of sand-scoured scarabs. I had traveled India in search of the miraculous. I had visited its temples and ashrams, its jungles and mountain retreats. But Yoga, a lifetime calling, the obsession of a disciplined and ascetic few, was not sufficient to carry me to the inner landscapes that I sought.

I learned in India that religion, in all times and places where the luminous flame of the spirit has guttered low, is no more than a hustle. Religion in India stares from world-weary eyes familiar with four millennia of priestcraft. Modern Hindu India to me was both an antithesis and a fitting prelude to the nearly archaic shamanism that I found in the lower Rio Putumayo of Colombia when I arrived there to begin studying the shamanic use of hallucinogenic plants.

Shamanism is the practice of the Upper Paleolithic tradition of healing, divination, and theatrical performance based on natural magic developed ten to fifty thousand

years ago. Mircea Eliade, author of *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy* and the foremost authority on shamanism in the context of comparative religion, has shown that in all times and places shamanism maintains a surprising internal coherency of practice and belief. Whether the shaman is an Arctic-dwelling Inuit or a Witoto of the Upper Amazon, certain techniques and expectations remain the same. Most important of these invariants is ecstasy, a point my brother and I make in our book *The Invisible Landscape*:

The ecstatic part of the shaman's initiation is harder to analyze, for it is dependent on a certain receptivity to states of trance and ecstasy on the part of the novice; he may be moody, somewhat frail and sickly, predisposed to solitude, and may perhaps have fits of epilepsy or catatonia, or some other psychological aberrance (though not always as some writers on the subject have asserted).<sup>1</sup> In any case, his psychological predisposition to ecstasy forms only the starting point for his initiation: the novice, after a history of psychosomatic illness or psychological aberration that may be more or less intense, will at last begin to undergo initiatory sickness and trances; he will lie as though dead or in deep trance for days on end. During this time, he is approached in dreams by his helping spirits, and may receive instruction from them. Invariably during this prolonged trance the novice will undergo an episode of mystical death and resurrection; he may see himself reduced to a skeleton and then clothed with new flesh; or he may see himself boiled in a caldron, devoured by the spirits, and then made whole again; or he may imagine himself being operated on by the spirits, his organs removed and replaced with "magical stones" and then sewn up again.

Eliade showed that, while the particular motifs may vary between cultures and even individuals, shamanism's general structure is clear: the neophyte shaman undergoes a symbolic death and resurrection, which is understood as a radical transformation into a superhuman condition. Henceforth, the shaman has access to the superhuman plane, is a master of ecstasy, can travel in the spirit realm at will, and most important, can cure and divine. As we noted in *The Invisible Landscape*:

In short, the shaman is transformed from a profane into a sacred state of being. Not only has he effected his own cure through this mystical transmutation, he is now invested with the power of the sacred, and hence can cure others as well. It is of the first order of importance to remember this, that the shaman is more than merely a sick man, or a madman; he is a sick man who has healed himself, who is cured, and who must shamanize in order to remain cured.<sup>2</sup>

It should be noted that Eliade used the word "profane" deliberately with the intent of creating a clear split between the notion of the profane world of ordinary experience and the sacred world which is "Wholly Other."<sup>3</sup>

## **THE TECHNIQUES OF ECSTASY**

Not all shamans use intoxication with plants to obtain ecstasy, but all shamanic practice aims to give rise to ecstasy. Drumming, manipulation of breath, ordeals, fasting, theatrical illusions, sexual abstinence—all are time-honored methods for entering into the trance necessary for shamanic work. Yet none of these methods is as effective,