



REVIEW ARTICLE

Hallucinogenic drugs in pre-Columbian Mesoamerican cultures[☆]

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PALABRAS CLAVE

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Abstract

Objectives: The archaeological, ethno-historical and ethnographic evidence of the use of hallucinogenic substances in Mesoamerica is reviewed.

Results: Hallucinogenic cactus, plants and mushrooms were used to induce altered states of consciousness in healing rituals and religious ceremonies. The Maya drank balché (a mixture of honey and extracts of *Lonchocarpus*) in group ceremonies to achieve intoxication. Ritual enemas and other psychoactive substances were also used to induce states of trance. Olmec, Zapotec, Maya and Aztec used peyote, hallucinogenic mushrooms (teonanacatl: *Psilocybe* spp.) and the seeds of ololiuhqui (*Turbina corymbosa*), that contain mescaline, psilocybin and lysergic acid amide, respectively. The skin of the toad *Bufo* spp. contains bufotoxins with hallucinogenic properties, and was used during the Olmec period. Jimson weed (*Datura stramonium*), wild tobacco (*Nicotiana rustica*), water lily (*Nymphaea ampla*) and *Salvia divinorum* were used for their psychoactive effects. Mushroom stones dating from 3000 BC have been found in ritual contexts in Mesoamerica. Archaeological evidence of peyote use dates back to over 5000 years. Several chroniclers, mainly Fray Bernardino de Sahagún, described their effects in the sixteenth century.

Conclusions: The use of psychoactive substances was common in pre-Columbian Mesoamerican societies. Today, local shamans and healers still use them in ritual ceremonies in Mesoamerica. © 2011 Sociedad Española de Neurología. Published by Elsevier España, S.L.U. All rights reserved.

Alucinógenos en las culturas precolombinas mesoamericanas

Resumen

Introducción: El continente americano es rico en hongos y plantas psicoactivas, y numerosas culturas precolombinas mesoamericanas las emplearon con fines mágicos, terapéuticos y religiosos.

Objetivos: Se revisan las evidencias arqueológicas, etnohistóricas y etnográficas del uso de sustancias alucinógenas en Mesoamérica.

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Resultados: Cactus, plantas y hongos alucinógenos se utilizaron para provocar estados alterados del nivel de conciencia en ceremonias rituales y curativas. Los mayas ingerían el balché (hidromiel y extracto de *Lonchocarpus*) en ceremonias grupales para lograr la embriaguez. También emplearon enemas rituales con sustancias psicoactivas para inducir estados de trance. Olmecas, zapotecas, mayas y aztecas usaron el peyote, los hongos alucinógenos (teonanacatl: *Psilocybe* spp.) y las semillas de ololiuhqui (*Turbina corymbosa*), que contienen mescalina, psilocibina y amida del ácido lisérgico, respectivamente. La piel del sapo *Bufo* spp. contiene bufotoxinas, con propiedades alucinógenas y fue usado desde el periodo olmeca. El toloache (*Datura estramonio*), el tabaco silvestre (*Nicotiana rustica*), el lirio de agua (*Nymphaea ampla*) y la hoja de la pastora (*Salvia divinorum*) se utilizaron por sus efectos psicotropos. Piedra fúngicas de 3.000 años de antigüedad se han encontrado en contextos rituales en Mesoamérica. Las evidencias arqueológicas del uso del peyote se remontan a más de 5.000 años. Diversos cronistas, entre ellos Fray Bernardino de Sahagún, relataron sus efectos en el siglo xvi.

Conclusiones: El empleo de sustancias psicotrópicas fue muy común en las sociedades precolumbinas mesoamericanas. En la actualidad chamanes y curanderos locales las siguen usando en ceremonias rituales.

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Introduction

Hallucinogens are substances that when ingested in non-toxic doses can provoke altered states of consciousness and induce unreal perceptions or distortions of the surroundings. Throughout history, numerous societies have isolated substances with hallucinogenic properties from fungus, plant, and animal sources. From an ethnobotanist's and anthropologist's viewpoint, the American continents provide excellent opportunities for studying a wide array of natural hallucinogens.¹

The diverse civilisations that flourished in Mesoamerica displayed great knowledge and skill in their use of numerous hallucinogens. Archaeological, ethnohistorical, and ethnographic evidence show that throughout history, pre-Columbian Mesoamerican cultures used hallucinogenic substances in magical, therapeutic, and religious rituals.^{2,3} These substances are considered entheogens since they were used to promote mysticism and communication with divine powers. The purpose of using these substances was to enter a trance and achieve greater enlightenment and open-mindedness. The altered state of consciousness the user aimed to reach was characterised by temporal and spatial disorientation, a sensation of ecstasy and inner peace, hallucinations of vivid colours, tendency towards introspection, and an impression of being one with nature and with the gods.⁴

Mesoamerican myths and religions emphasise the role of the priest or shaman as a mediator between the physical and the spiritual worlds, and this situation promoted the use of entheogens in religious ceremonies and prophecy.⁵ Shamans, intermediaries between the natural and supernatural realms, would consume numerous psychoactive substances to undertake their shamanic journeys. This would begin when the shaman's spirit left the natural world and continued to wander the supernatural world, making contact with the spirits in order to acquire knowledge about plants, diagnose diseases, or ensure a good harvest or rainy season, before finally returning to his body in the physical world.⁶

Both Mesoamerican and Andean iconography offer numerous depictions of the shamanic journey and trance state induced by hallucinogens.⁷ Furthermore, psychoactive plants were believed to be associated with certain gods, and they had voices that the shaman was expected to convey or adopt after partaking.

Inebriation: balché and the Mayan ritual enemas

Drugs, drinks, and ritual enemas were used in the sacred ceremonies practised all across Mesoamerica. Using or combining different psychoactive plants with intoxicating elixirs was also common. Consumption of many of these substances dates back to the Olmec era (1200-400 BCE). However, researchers are better informed about Mayan and Aztec societies based on Mayan religious texts (the Popol Vuh) and the first outside accounts of Aztec culture from the 16th century.

The Maya (250 BCE-900 AD)⁸ consumed an intoxicating beverage called *balché*, which is an infusion of the bark of *Lonchocarpus longistylus* mixed with honey from bees fed on a type of morning glory with a high ergine content. Inebriation was connected with the practice of divination, a ritual intended to enable direct communication with the spirits in order to predict the future or understand events that would otherwise be incomprehensible, including illnesses, shifts in fortune, adverse meteorological events, poor harvests, and the outcomes of combats or wars. Since the alcoholic content of *balché* seemed to have been quite low, it had to be ingested in large quantities in order to provoke an intoxicating effect. During ceremonies, participants' vomit was collected in bags that were then hung around their necks. *Balché* has survived the test of time, and the Maya in the Mexican state of Yucatán still consume it.

Pulque, or 'chi' to the Maya, was another alcoholic drink made by fermenting the sap of the maguey plant. Different ceramic works from the Mayan classic period produced vessels marked with the glyph 'chi'. References to the use of hallucinogenic drinks also appear in the Dresden, Borgia, Florentine, and Borbonicus codices. The Codex

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