Food of the Gods: The Search for the Original Tree of Knowledge Study Guide

Food of the Gods: The Search for the Original Tree of Knowledge by Terence McKenna

BOOKRAGS

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Plot Summary

"Food of the Gods: The Search for the Original Tree of Knowledge" is a book examining human history and its relationship to psychoactive plants and substances. The author provides evidence and arguments for hallucinogenic plants playing a role in human evolution, particularly that of growing self-reflection. The book also explores the recent uses of drugs by humans and argues for a reappraisal of human's relationship to plants and nature.

McKenna begins by painting the picture of "paradise" - how our human ancestors connected to nature and how this relationship allowed for human evolution. Our ancestors were likely opportunists, foraging and consuming any food-like plant, especially during times of scarcity. If they consumed hallucinogenic mushrooms, they would have enjoyed increased visual acuity resulting in hunting and gathering success, greater food supplies and increased reproductive fitness. In addition, mushroom consumption supported a spiritual connection with plants, fostered a sense of community, and served as a catalyst for human self-reflection. Shamanic rituals, which often include the use of intoxicating plants, pay homage to this ancient relationship.

Although our ancestors enjoyed a period of peace and equality, this did not last for long. Other refined intoxicants began to replace the plant-based ones. Alcohol and fermented honey were two such examples. Cannabis, commonly known as hashish, was another popular substance. McKenna notes that during this time, social attitudes and values were also beginning to change. Wine for example, had a tendency to suppress the feminine, with women in Ancient Rome not even allowed to imbibe wine.

However, McKenna argues that more recent drugs were more destructive to humanity for endorsing dominator styles. He also notes the hypocrisies that exist in attitudes towards drugs, noting the substances such as tobacco are widely accepted and legalized, despite their clear connection to diseases and poor health outcomes, while opium is not. McKenna also introduces unconventional addictions, such as sugar, caffeine and television. Sugar is particularly damaging, as its use is unnecessary and its production created slave trade. Caffeine is noted as the only drug with acceptable addiction rituals (e.g. coffee break), and television is touted as an addiction with the most amount of converts and with the least stigma. Other synthetics, such as heroin and cocaine, have only added to dominator styles through racial politics.

McKenna concludes the book by advocating a return to archaic ways and a symbiotic relationship with plants. He presents a short history of psychedelics and how their incorporation into modern living could have great benefits. He also proposes solutions for the "drug problem," noting that mismanagement of drug use will remain, as long as the experimentation of boundary testing of psychoactives is not allowed. He argues that a democratic society should aim to educate people to make informed choices about their own needs and ideals. The legalization of drugs is just one solution. He also notes that these substances should be taxed and other related policies regarding guns and banking should be strengthened. Only then, he argues, can humans return to a time of

self-reflection, a partnership with other living organisms, and an understanding of their place in the world.

Shamanism: Setting the Stage

Shamanism: Setting the Stage Summary and Analysis

"Food of the Gods: The Search for the Original Tree of Knowledge" is a book examining human history and its relationship to psychoactive plants and substances. The author provides evidence and arguments for hallucinogenic plants playing a role in human evolution, particularly that of growing self-reflection. The book also demonstrates the recent relationships between humans and drugs and argues for a return to specific legalized and accepted drug use.

In "Shaminism: Setting the Stage," McKenna discusses shamanism, an ancient practice based on natural magic using healing, divination, and theatrical performance. Shamanism developed ten to fifty thousand years ago.

Although shamanism exists in different cultures, the general theme is such that the shaman undergoes a transformation into a superhuman condition through death and resurrection. Following the transformation, a shaman is able to travel to the spirit realm and transcend the human plane in order to cure and divinate.

Shamans are also masters of ecstasy. To give rise to ecstasy, a shaman may participate in activities such as drumming, breathing exercises, fasting, or sexual abstinence. However the most effective method involves the use of plants containing hallucinogenic compounds.

Contrary to Western medicine in which the healers (doctors) give medicine to the sick (patients), in shamanism, it is usually the shaman who ingests the drugs. The shamanic plants allow the shaman to transcend the human reality into another world. As such, other people have concluded that psychedelic plants can be tools for exploration of the human psyche.

McKenna describes his experience drinking a brew with an ayahuasca witch - exhilaration and terror culminating in the intense gratitude of life. Although initially appalled when he began his research in shamanism, McKenna came to acknowledge another reality in which "magic" is more real than scientific constructs.

Food of the Gods: The Search for the Original Tree of Knowledge

Summary and Analysis

In "The Magic in Food," McKenna discusses the unappreciated role of plants in mediating human culture and relationships. Foods can elicit specific emotional responses and behaviors. Additionally, plants can serve medicinal purposes as in the example of the Aspilia leaves which contain bacteria-killing properties and are commonly used to treat wounds and stomachaches.

The conversion of the human as an omnivore - an organism that ate anything foodlike, including plants and other animals - gave rise to eating as an experience and to genetically variant individuals, which would increase human success. Humans and plants co-evolved, each mutually benefiting from the other in a shared relationship.

Human evolution has been markedly fast compared to typical courses of evolution. The brain of early hominids increased in both size and complexity over a relatively short period of time (3 million years). Early ancestors to humans used tools, made fires and became bipedal - an advantage in open-country habitats where arms could be used to hold and carry objects.

McKenna theorizes that the real "missing link" is that psychoactive chemical compounds in the early human diet are responsible for the rapid changes in brain processes. Such compounds could have enhanced information-processing activity and environmental sensitivity, and acted as catalysts in imagination and creativity. Small amounts of hallucinogens, such as psilocybin, unknowingly consumed could increase visual acuity for hunting and gathering success. Increased good supplies would increase reproductive success. In addition, psilocybin could cause sexual arousal and increase copulation. Such adaptive advantages could explain the growth and stimulation of the brain.

McKenna observes that humans often need to acquire a taste for substances whose taste "skirts the edges of acceptability." He cites examples of first sips of bourbon or puff of cigarettes. Repetition of exposure can lead to recognition and positive associations.

The Search for the Original Tree of Knowledge

The Search for the Original Tree of Knowledge Summary and Analysis

Hallucinogens may be endogenous, within the body such as serotonin, or exogenous, from an outside source such as in edible plants. They may act as regulatory hormones or alter moods and states of being. The family of active chemical compounds, the indole hallucinogens, are suggested as key players in the emergence of human self-reflection. The molecular rings make the indoles highly reactive and ideal for metabolic activity.

There are four families that occur in plants and cause visual hallucinogens:

1. LSD-type compounds. These are rare in nature, occurring in the morning glory genera. These compounds cause mind expansion and increased ability to think and connect. Rather large doses are needed to elicit effects.

2. Tryptamin hallucinogens (e.g. DMT, psilocin, psilocybin). These are found in higher plant families such as legumes and mushrooms. DMT occurs endogenously in the brain and creates the most profound and visually spectacular hallucinations that are brief, intense and nontoxic.

3. Beta carbolines (e.g. harmine and harmaline). Important for visionary shamanism, they are hallucinogenic at close to toxic levels. They can be combined with DMT to prolong and intensify visual hallucinations. They are legal and only recently known to the general public.

4. Ibogaine family of substances. These are found in two related bush trees in Africa and are known more as aphrodisiacs. They can also be used to induce powerful visionary and emotional experiences.

The plant that is responsible for the emergence of human consciousness must meet the following criteria: be African and native to grassland, require no preparation, be continuously available, and confer immediate, tangible benefits to the individual when eaten.

McKenna deduces that through the process of elimination, the only group fitting that criteria is the Tryptamin hallucingens, and the organism of interest is most likely a mushroom. An archaeological site in Thailand called Non Nak Tha suggests the mushroom Stropharia cubensis is the Ur plant.

Another controversial issue among evolutionary biologists is why secondary compounds and their hallucinogenic properties exist. McKenna argues that they are not secondary

at all, but exopheromones designed to act across species. This idea supports the notion of co-evolution in nature - a maximization of mutual cooperation and coordination of goals through biochemical communications.

McKenna calls the presence of hallucinogens in a culture that encourages higher states of self-reflection, the encounter with the Transcendent Other, Nature in her non-ordinary form. Humans may have eaten their way into "higher consciousness," and mushrooms and mold-infected cereal grains may have had a profound effect on human evolution.

Plant and Primates: Postcards from the Stoned Age

Plant and Primates: Postcards from the Stoned Age Summary and Analysis

Human are unique due to their cognitive activities. For example, human beings are able to speak, fantasize, fall in love, create art , recall and use memories, and participate in sports. This cognition allows human beings to manage behaviors that are genetically preprogrammed in other species.

The use of symbols and language to store information outside of the physical brain allows for easy transference of information. Language allowed information to cross space and time - even a simple warning cry could result in increased species fitness.

McKenna is careful to note that hallucinogens did not cause or create consciousness - more that hallucinogens catalyzed awareness of consciousness and self-reflection. Human beings may have already been on the pathway to increased cognitive functioning and language, and consuming compounds such as psilocybin merely quickened or activated the process. Hallucinations may have inspired those who consumed them to communicate and share their experiences.

McKenna recognizes that his theory is difficult to accept by society, that altered states are taboo and acceptance of the unknown and mysteries of origin threaten current ideologies. He notes that psilocybin activates the area of the brain known for processing signals and often creates active impulses to speak. Thus, intoxication created speech and expression and may have allowed our ancestors to use vocal sounds to clear their heads.

For the hunter-gatherers, women needed language much more than their male counterparts. Women who were best able to communicate images of foods, sources, and preparation had an advantage. Language among women eventually led to the discovery of agriculture - which once again, altered the course of human evolution. The use of agriculture and domestication of plants and animals separated humans from the wild and created a very different relationship between humans and Nature.

Habits as Culture and Religion

Habits as Culture and Religion Summary and Analysis

McKenna argues that intoxication can act to dissolve the modern notion of the psyche called the ego. Dissolving the ego results in the undifferentiated feeling that Eastern philosophy calls the Tao, a collective connection to the Earth, which is the goal of much of Eastern thought.

Western philosophy differs from Eastern ways on many levels. Western focus has been on the ego and monotheism. It also differs in being the only theology lacking a relationship with a woman - no mother, sister, partner or daughter. Modern religion does not set aside the ego but instead centers around a rigid moral structure and sense of obligation.

Existentialism is born from the loneliness of man and his disconnection from the unconscious. In place of symbiotic relationships with plants, scientific industrialism and global politics have created an unchecked growth of dominator values.

The archaic values were also different in terms of sexuality. Group experiences with hallucinogens helped dissolve boundaries and differences between people as well as promoted open and non-proprietary sexuality. One indole hallucinogen, ibogaine from the Bwiti plant, is an aphrodisiac that enhances the psychological mechanism behind the sex drive rather than other stimulants that cause generalized arousal or sustained erections. This means that it does not create sexual desire where sexual activity is not sanctioned or appropriate.

Family organization is less rigid and hierarchical - children are raised by extended relatives alongside cousins and siblings. Women, who are not treated as property, do not need to seek extended commitment for security and hierarchical purposes. Power was distributed between both sexes and all age groups - eliminating the need of men to choose young women of child-bearing ability and women to select older men who can provide resources (as in the dominator model). Such a partnership society is based on roles appropriate to age, size and level of skill and encourages the full expression and social utilization of all members of the group.

The High Plains of Eden

The High Plains of Eden Summary and Analysis

Archaeological evidence for such ideas exist. One area in southern Algeria, Tassili-n-Ajjer Plateau has rock paintings depicting shamans covered in mushrooms dancing with fistfuls of mushrooms. Another painting shows the shamans running alongside geometric figures depicting their hallucinations. Similar images are found in Peruvian textiles.

The Round Head Period, named for the style of human depictions, is estimated to have lasted several thousand years around the ninth millennium. The Great Goddess was profound in these images and an Egyptian influence was prominent as well, indicating that the central Sahara might be the source of pre-Dynastic Egypt.

This partnership paradise did not last forever. The transformation of the hunter-gather culture to one of animal and plant domestication gave way to Western civilization. McKenna suggests that in the Book of Genesis, the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge is the psilocybin-containing mushroom Stropharia cubensis He also presents evidence that the western Sahara is a possible source of the advanced culture entering Palestine in the mid-tenth millennium B.C.E. The further suppression of the partnership model is evident in the witch burnings of the medieval Church.

McKenna concludes that it is crucial that human beings revert to an archaic values and partnership model. Gaian Holism, a sense of unity and balance of nature, is a plant-based view that places human sense within a larger context.

Searching for Soma: The Golden Vedic Enigma

Searching for Soma: The Golden Vedic Enigma Summary and Analysis

McKenna argues that in order to solve the global crisis, human beings must return to ancient models, a solution that requires current notions, such as illegal plants, to be tossed aside. A renewed shamanism is offered as a last best hope.

The ancient Indo-Europeans were nomadic, credited with the domestication of the horse and practiced a religion based on a substance called Soma. Soma was a juice or sap squeezed from the Soma plant, filtered and often mixed with milk. It was believed to have magical origins - from an eagle from the highest heavens or in the mountains placed by a Hindu god.

Modern-day scientists have tried to piece together to which plant Soma refers. Geographically, Soma was likely an item of trade available in the original homelands of the Aryans or came about after encounters with pastoralists from the Konya Plain of Anatolia. It was a mountain plant with hanging branches and a yellow color. Large amounts must have been present, as worshiping the gods required three daily pressings. However, it is difficult to determine from records full of mythical lore.

Soma gradually disappeared as trade routes became longer and more linguistic challenges arose. Another explanation was that a new religion, Zoraster, arose and discouraged acts leading to God-like empowerment.

It was theorized by Gornon and Valentina Wasson that Soma was actually Amanita muscaria, a species of mushroom. However, amanita was genetically and chemically variable and not readily known as ecstasy-producing. Preparation may have increased any hallucinogenic properties; however, it is unlikely that a plant needing so much preparation would have been the legendary Soma. A more likely plant was Stropharia cubensis, a dung-loving mushroom that would have been abundant in the pastoral times. Depictions of mushrooms in ancient art further support this notion. However the difference in climates and lack of psilocybin-containing mushrooms in India cause potential problems.

Soma was also the supreme entity - a male lunar deity that stood above the gods. In the Near East, there was a male moon god, Sin/Nannar, who wore headgear suggestive of a mushroom.

Twilight in Eden: Minoan Crete and the Eleusinian Mystery

Twilight in Eden: Minoan Crete and the Eleusinian Mystery Summary and Analysis

McKenna theorizes that there might be several reasons for the growing distance between the human-fungal partnership; the introduction of other psychoactive plant substitutes, such as ephedra and fermented honey may be one of those. The changes in climates would have affected mushroom growth, rendering it from regular to seasonal. Mushrooms could be preserved through drying or preserving them in honey, an easily fermentable substance that could have led to the gradual replacement of mushrooms. Psychoactive plants might have also become symbols, replaced by plants with inactive properties, and then not replaced at all, but merely abandoned.

Minoan society inherited many values and cultures from far-off times. It maintained the partnership ideal for three millennia after the rest of the world had fallen into the dominator model. In ancient mythology, Glaukos, the son of Minos and Pasiphae, died falling into a jar of honey. Minos tried to seek out Glaukos and was given a riddle of explaining the different colors of cows in a simile. One of the diviners for this task, Polyidos found the boy through his powers of divination and discovered an herb used to restore a dead snake to life. He used that herb to restore Glaukos. In this tale, Glaukos, (meaning "blue-gray," similar to the bruising that indicates the presence of psilocybin, who is preserved in honey), may be symbolic of a mushroom.

Another mythical connection was through Dionysus, son of Zeus and Semele, the god of intoxication. Dionysus was twice born, and was an androgynous male god with a symbiotic relationship to vegetation. Furthermore, a great festival was celebrated on the Eleusinian plain near Athens in which an intoxicating drink was likely consumed. The preparation of such a ritual beverage contained ingredients whose first letters could be arranged to spell the word "mushroom," which was thought to be the secret ingredient.

One speculation concerning the Eleusinian beverage was that a hallucinogenic fungus had infected the grain that was central to the celebration. Vessels with depictions of barley lend credence to the notion of a barley drink, perhaps beer. However, ergot-infected grains are often toxic, not intoxicating, accused of contributing to the decline of the Roman empire and Salem witch burnings.

Alcohol and the Alchemy of Spirit

Alcohol and the Alchemy of Spirit Summary and Analysis

McKenna discusses the ways humans have tried to replace natural intoxicants. Alcohol has remained as an intoxicating substance from Archaic cultural ties. Honey, a medicinal substance in all traditional cultures, has been used as a preservative. Fermented honey, called mead, has been a recreational drug of Indo-European tribes. The lore surrounding honey is that bees came from the carcasses of cows, establishing another cattle-intoxicant link. McKenna views these substances as weak substitutes for the original relationship with mushrooms.

Fermentation of grains and fruits into wine appeared later in Greek culture. Their alcohol content could not have exceeded 14%; however, Greek wines were regarded as needing several dilutions . They may have been more similar to an extract of tincture than modern day wine.

Alcohol fermentation is an example of movement from a natural drug to a synthetic drug. Through distillation, alcohol was the first highly-concentrated drug. McKenna notes it is important to recognize that prior to distillation, alcoholism was extremely rare. The distillation process, in which the alcohol is vaporized and recaptured, made it possible to isolate the intoxicant. The first record of distillation comes from the fourth century C.E. writings of a Chinese alchemist; however, in the West, distillation is credited to the alchemist Raymond Lully.

McKenna argues that alcohol has had the most prolonged detrimental effect on humans of all drugs. Alcohol, through production, control and taxation, played a major role in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It also helped drive slavery, as slaves were needed to grow and process the sugar necessary to create rum.

While alcohol has empowering effects, there are also detrimental effects such as loss of general motor skills and sexual performance. McKenna suggests that the disharmony between the individual and society causes excessive drinking, despite alcohol's negative side effects.

McKenna also discusses gender relations and alcohol. According to some records, only men were allowed to imbibe alcohol - contrary to the Archaic mushroom orgies. McKenna uses this as evidence of the dominator style hatred of women and that the modern tolerance of alcohol as a legal drug further endorses a dominator philosophy.

Ballad of the Dreaming Weavers: Cannabis and Culture

Ballad of the Dreaming Weavers: Cannabis and Culture Summary and Analysis

The cannabis has been a part of human culture longer than any other plant. It was introduced in Africa, but made its way over the land bridge into the new world. Its broad geographical range and adaptability resulted in its large impact in human society. An intoxicating substance, hashish, is created from collecting the cannabis resin into black sticky balls. Cannabis is known by a variety of names in hundreds of different languages.

Hashish is several thousands of years old, although smoking cannabis is a relatively new ritual. The previous method of intoxication was through ingestion; however, smoking was discovered as the quickest and most efficient way to experience its effects. It is unclear when smoking first began, and if it was a new behavior or an old forgotten one re-discovered.

A nomadic group from central Asia, the Scythians, brought cannabis to Europe around 700 B.C.E. Their ritual, a cannabis sweat lodge, demonstrated the preference for inhaling; however, no instruments (e.g. pipe) had been created yet. In China, cannabis cultivation may have started as early as 28th century B.C.E. India demonstrated strong awareness of cannabis and its properties in 1000 B.C.E. when records were available. Cannabis was not widespread until 10th century C.E. and played a role in the secret side of religion and spirituality.

McKenna discusses the role of cannabis culture. Cultures can sometimes be predicted or interpreted based on their viewpoints toward psychoactive substances. Cannabis, even in its breeding mechanism, requires honor and respect for the feminine. In addition, the effects of cannabis encourage less goal-oriented and competitive behavior, in contrast to coffee habits, which are promoted in industrialized culture. While legalization and taxation of cannabis could provide additional income, it is not a modern value and money is actually spent to prevent cannabis use.

Cannabis and opium shared a role in 19th century Europe. The popularity and exotic intrigue of opium paved the way for cannabis exploration. There was a legal and intellectual ambiance of intoxication during this time. However, eating hashish remained primarily confined to the Near and Middle East.

Americans in the 19th century can be credited to writing the literature describing hashish as a metaphysical revelation. "Scientific" explorations of hashish were intended to stoke imagination and inspiration. McKenna argues that the use of "recreational" to describe substance use trivializes the impact and that the accepted environment for

drug-taking (e.g. noisy night club) is less than ideal to experience the cognitive effects. This idea is contrary to the ideas from the Archaic model - which encouraged ritual, isolation, sensory deprivation and introspection.

The period where cannabis use was neither popularized nor stigmatized in America was brief. In the 1930's the Commissioner of Narcotics created a public hysteria towards cannabis, in part because companies were threatened by competitive hemp fiber. However, cannabis use continued to rise. McKenna interprets this as evidence of a psychological need for humans to return to the Archaic Model.

Complacencies of the Peignor: Sugar, Coffee, Tea and Chocolate

Complacencies of the Peignor: Sugar, Coffee, Tea and Chocolate Summary and Analysis

McKenna argues that in prehistoric times, when food resources dwindled, our ancestors had to try other products in the environment as sources of food, and there was evolutionary pressure for animals with broader definitions of taste. Acquiring a new taste is both psychological and biochemical; it requires adding new behaviors as well as new digestion processes.

The lack of chemical stimulation and drug scarcity, particularly in Medieval Europe, paved the way for mania surrounding dyes and spices. These were the closest replacements for excitement and variety - and encouraged much of the shipbuilding, traveling and trade during this time. McKenna postulates that the Christian Middle Ages, rife with moral rectitude and sexual repression, ended because the spice trade routes enabled access to new and exotic objects such as opium, silks, and gems.

McKenna remarks that global trade was created to serve to people's "inherent need for variety and stimulation." Indeed, the trade route brought many new commodities, many of which served as sources of addiction. Cane sugar, known as a rare medicinal substance (to make medicine palatable and to pack wounds before binding), from a bamboo-like grass that only grows in tropical areas was once such commodity. The desire for sugar was so great, that the Spanish introduced slavery into the New World for the purposes of sugar production. McKenna argues that sugar is the most damaging of addictive substances, in part because it is least recognized and the hardest to break but mostly due to its role in slavery. He notes that modern drug trade does not cause the atrocities related to the kidnapping, enslaving and mass murder caused by sugar production. McKenna argues that dominator styles and attitudes toward drugs perpetuate cycles of exploitation.

Caffeine soon emerged as another addictive drug. The sugar craze enabled this bitter-tasting stimulant found in coffee, tea and cocoa to be palatable. Tea particularly played a large role in England, and infamously a tax on the commodity. Coffee was first introduced as a food or medicine using whole berries, and then ground and cooked with wine. It was only later, in the 12th century that it was brewed and then roasted in the 13th century. While there once existed an edict against coffee in Europe during the 16th century, caffeine consumption is the only drug ritual widely accepted in modern culture, despite caffeine's addictive nature and associations with health problems such as insomnia and stomach ulcers. Chocolate, made from ground cacao beans and also containing small amounts of caffeine and the stimulant theobromine, was introduced by Cortes to Spain around the 16th century, although it did not gain in popularity until much

later, perhaps because it was in competition with the other new stimulants around this time.

McKenna remarks that in two centuries, these four stimulants of sugar, coffee, tea and chocolate, created trade empires of such importance that they needed military power to defend them and slavery to support them.

Smoke Gets in Your Eyes: Opium and Tobacco

Smoke Gets in Your Eyes: Opium and Tobacco Summary and Analysis

McKenna discusses the paradoxical attitudes to two different intoxicating plants - opium and tobacco. Although both have demonstrated an addictive nature, opium (from the opium poppy and used to create heroin and morphine) is illegal in most parts of the world, and tobacco, despite its association with negative health outcomes, is legal in all countries. He notes that this is a characteristic of the dominator model - picking and choosing which truths it believes. If looked at objectively, the two plant-based substances produce similar societal consequences and should be treated equally. However, extraneous factors influence these attitudes unfairly.

The custom of smoking for narcotic purposes and tobacco are native to the New World. When Columbus introduced tobacco to Europe, it was quickly adopted throughout in several forms (chewed, snuffed, and smoked) - even classified as "a man's prerogative" by the 19th century.

Opium has a long history of use in Eurasia for several thousands of years. The Minoans were known to widely cultivate poppies. Raw opium comes from the crushed seed capsule of the poppy plant. Dissolved into wine, ingested and much later smoked, opium was known as a painkiller, euphorint and aphrodisiac.

Although opium has strong habit-forming qualities, physicians were generally unaware of problems with addiction for two thousand years, perhaps because daily doses and opium rituals were socially accepted and thought of as bringing sleep and relief to problems.

While opium was enjoying a revival in Europe, tobacco was being discovered in the New World. Columbus's first trip to Cuba yielded the discovery of native men and women who partially inserted burning rolls of dry herbs wrapped in a large dry leaf called tobacos into their noses and inhaled the smoke. This introduced not only tobacco, but the art of smoking or inhaling, a fast-acting and easily abused way to use drugs.

Tobacco was responsible for the economy of the colonial New World. It played a role in the shamanic rituals of the natives, was introduced as an aphrodisiac by the sailors, and as an enema for medical patients, but was banned by the likes of Popes, Protestants, and even King James I of England. The bans only served to heighten the tobacco craze and unfortunately, the emphasis on tobacco for its recreational potential and the wide propagation of the milder, less toxic of the tobacco species led to tobacco losing its shamanic connotation and hallucinogenic power.

The tobacco ban also served to the experimentation of smoking opium in China. By 1793, opium and tobacco were often smoked together. China's efforts to ban opium traffic only resulted in war. After China's second defeat, opium traffic was legalized, demonstrating that profit can overwhelm institutional forces that stand in the way.

Synthetics: Heroin, Cocaine and Television

Synthetics: Heroin, Cocaine and Television Summary and Analysis

Morphine was isolated from the poppy plant in 1805, though its use was restricted and sporadic until the middle of the century, when the hypodermic syringe was invented. These two inventions were coupled to treat wounded soldiers in the American Civil War and the Franco-Prussian War to the degree that morphine addiction was known as "the soldier's disease."

Morphine was the first "hard drug," or highly addictive injectable narcotic. Heroin, which was invented as a cure for morphine addiction, proved to be more addictive than morphine while also becoming named the most depraved of drugs, despite alcohol causing ten times more death. McKenna theorizes this happens for two reasons. One, the addictive property of any drug can cause the user to act out in order to get their fix, but heroin addicts cannot simply walk into the 7-Eleven to make their purchase the way tobacco addicts can. Two, the intoxicated state is a detached place without pain, regret, and distraction of fear, thus making it an ideal drug for populations who have been traumatized or damaged.

Cocaine comes from the coca plant, which is native to the rain forests of South American. Coca is a powerful appetite suppressant that contains a significant amount of vitamins and minerals. In fact, native coca users think of coca as a food, not a drug. Entrepreneurs saw tremendous potential in coca and created coca-based and -laced wines, tonics and elixirs.

Cocaine and heroine were made illegal around the start of the twentieth century amid fear surrounding rumors that southern blacks, maddened by drugs, might attack whites. While the addictive properties of these drugs were not much different from those surrounding alcohol, tobacco, and caffeine, there was a huge discrepancy in how each was viewed and treated.

McKenna also notes that there exist electronic drugs - technology that acts directly on the user and transports them to a different reality. That drug is television, the fastest moving, most prevalent addictive craze. While television is not chemically invasive, McKenna argues that TV allows users to similarly block out the real world. Perhaps more frightful than TV addiction is the realization that TV is manufactured and can be used to "protect" or impose cultural values. With so many viewers and so little oversight, TV could have more damaging potential than drugs.

A Brief History of Psychedelics

A Brief History of Psychedelics Summary and Analysis

The tropical and subtropical zones in the New World are rich in hallucinogenic plants beyond geographically comparable areas of Southeast Asia and Indonesia. Psilocybin, for example, has a rich history of use in Oaxacan, Mexico for three millennia. Because of the clustering of hallucinogenic drugs in the New World, Western scientists were late to discover them. Explorer-naturalists were among the first to observe activities that included drug use among aboriginal people.

Shamanic rituals appear to utilize pharmacological reactions, often mixing several drugs in order to prolong or intensify effects. Furthermore, some of these psychedelic plants, such as ayahuasca, are regarded as healing elixirs and used to treat or combat diseases such as malaria or intestinal parasites.

Ayahuasca, a hallucinogen derived from a woody climbing vine found in South America, use creates a rich visual hallucination intensified by sound and often coupled with magical songs or icaros. During curing sessions, both the patient and healer ingest ayahuasca in order to direct healing energy into parts of the body.

Mescaline, another powerful visionary drug also from a peyote cactus, has been used by the Northern Mexican Indians for several centuries. In Peru, its use dates several thousands of years. Mescaline induced a "paradis artificial" more potent than cannabis or opium and attracted the interest of surrealists and psychologists.

Interest in hallucinogenic indoles occurred primarily in the mid-twentieth century. Blas Pablo Reko is responsible for the first specimen of psilocybin-containing mushroom to be studied scientifically. Around this time in Europe, Albert Hofmann synthesized LSD, hoping to create a new drug to ease labor and childbirth. Hofmann accidentally absorbed the LSD by handling the chemical without gloves and experienced a kaleidoscope of colors and shapes in the world's first LSD trip.

Shortly after, Steven Szara, a Czech scientist, synthesized dimethyltryptamine, DMT - the shortest acting, but most powerful of all hallucinogens. The following year, Valentina and Gordon Wasson published an article in Life magazine detailing the discovery of the psilocybin mushroom complex.

Although psychedelics were of great interest to psychologists and other behaviorists, psychedelic research has been curtailed by the end of the 1960s. Around 1975, techniques and manuals for home-growing of mushrooms were developed. McKenna notes that governments are reluctant to legalize drugs, fearing such psychedelic drugs might cause shifts in societal values and self-reflection. He argues that the only way for

humans to master their relationship with psychoactive substances is to decriminalize drugs and endorse shamanism.

Anticipating the Archaic Parade

Anticipating the Archaic Parade Summary and Analysis

McKenna makes it clear that his interest is in reconnecting to vision-producing plants, not synthetics. McKenna wishes to re-establish the symbiotic relationship with plants, noting that symbiotic plants should be benign to human metabolism. He notes that good technique requires one to pay attention and let go in a safe, familiar setting. Because everyone's experiences are different, McKenna encourages an open dialogue.

McKenna suggests several next steps to ensure an Archaic Revival. One is a redefinition of the word drug. Currently drug has a negative connotation and treats plant-based sources in the same vein as synthesized and refined ones. McKenna argues that the psychedelic issue is a civil rights and civil liberties issue because it deals with the most basic of human freedoms - religious practice and privacy of the mind. The author also notes that the problem lies in the mismanagement of technologies.

McKenna believes that our society's inability to face the issue of drugs and habitual destructive behavior is a recipe for unhappiness. He argues that our biological history calls for the use of psychoactive plants and that these plants are the missing link in understanding the human beings' place in nature. He hopes that eventually food and drug preferences will be viewed as "a natural consequence of human dignity."

The author concludes that the drug war was never meant to end and suggests a plan to come to terms with America's drug problems. This proposal includes increased federal taxes on tobacco and alcohol, ends to government subsidizes for tobacco production, the legalization and taxation of cannabis, strict gun control and banking regulation, scientific research, and decriminalization of drugs.

Characters

Richard Evans Schultes

Richard Evans Schultes was an ethnobotanist who had been a medical student when he learned about Heinrich Kluver's work on mescaline. He hypothesized that Reko's second sample, the mushroom, was the mysterious teonanacatl described by Spanish chroniclers. Schultes and a graduate student published evidence identifying teonanacatl as a psychoactive mushroom.

Schultes accompanied Reko to a village in the Sierra Mazatecan highlands to collect specimens of psychoactive mushrooms for Harvard, but their work was interrupted by the war during the late 1930s. He worked for the Office of Strategic Services studying rubber extraction in the Amazon Basin until the invention of synthetic rubber. He was there for more than fifteen years.

During his time in the Basin he studied and collected orchids. He would later write about his work among the shamans of the Sibundoy Valley of Southern Colombia. Although his early interest was peyote and mushrooms, Schultes later studied various species of morning glories that induced visions.

Schultes later oversaw the birth of ethnopsychopharmacology at Harvard. He also published an article demonstrating that traditional shamanic usage of plant-produced DMT existed.

Gordon and Valentina Wasson

Gordon and Valentina Wasson were the founders of the science of ethnomycology, or the study of how people use mushrooms, including in stories. Wasson was a New York investment banker, thus well connected to the public forums with the most exposure.

They were published in Life magazine for their discovery of the psilocybin mushroom complex and the first to suggest that the ancient intoxicant Soma might be a mushroom. They gathered much evidence, through the evolution of language, examining artist pieces and interpreting the Vedic model. They suggested that Soma was a scarlet-capped, white spotted fly agaric, Amanita muscaria.

Gordon Wasson published a few books, Soma: Divine Mushroom of Immortality and Persephone's Quest. Because Aminita was an unreliable source of ecstasy, Wasson believed some level of preparation must have been required.

The Wassons refused to give up on their idea, even in the face of contradictory evidence. McKenna discusses them as he traces the theories behind Soma and the history of psychedelic drugs.

Blas Pablo Reko

Blas Pablo Reko was born Blasius Paul Reko, a wanderer who explored the United States, Ecuador, and Oaxacan Mexico. He had an interest in ethnobotany and archaeo-astronomy, the study of ancient cultures' beliefs and attitudes of the stars. Reko studied plant usage among the native people he lived with, and famously noted that it was a hallucinogenic mushroom, not peyote, that Mixtec and Mazatecan shamans used to induce visions. He collected two samples of particularly interesting plants and send them to an anthropologist and curator named Henry Wassen. The first sample was of the piule seed, morning glory seeds that contained psychoactive properties related to LSD. The second sample was the first specimen of psilocybin-containing mushroom the scientific community had seen.

Paracelsus

Paracelsus was a sixteenth-century Swiss alchemist and medical reformer who advocated for opium on a wide scale. He is known as the father of "chemo-therapy" and credited for a revival of interest in opium and for being an alchemist. He discovered how to refine and concentrate the psychoactive properties of the poppy plant. He thought that he had uncovered a universal panacea.

Lewis Lewin

Lewis Lewin was a German pharmacologist who toured the United States and returned with peyote buttons from the Parke-Davis Company during a stay in Detroit. The peyote buttons were from the vision-inducing cactus of the Sonoran Indians. Lewin was known for extracting, describing and self-experimenting with the compounds he discovered. McKenna discusses his work in the context of psychopharmacology interest of hallucinogenic plants.

W.B. O'Shaughnessy

W.B. O'Shaughnessy was an English physician who introduced ganga, Indian hemp, to England in 1842. He wrote ganja into his Bengal Pharmacopeia and cannabis became a part of medical practice and apothecaries. McKenna mentions him for his role in spreading cannabis in Europe in "Cannabis and Culture."

Thomas De Quincey

Thomas De Quincey conveyed his experiences with opium intoxication in his book, Confessions of an English Opium-Eater. He invented the primary genre of drug literature, the drug "confession" when he described his visual experiences from opium.

The author introduces him when discusses the spread of opium in "Opium and Tobacco."

Carl Koller

Carl Koller was a student of Sigmund Freud's. He lived in Vienna and discovered cocaine had a medical application - that of a local anesthetic. Cocaine was thought of as a medical breakthrough, although its role as an addiction-inducing stimulant was also noted. Koller's discover changed the face of surgery, and the author notes his contribution in "Heroin, Cocaine, and Television."

Richard Helms

Richard Helms was once director of the CIA. He was also the prime instigator of Operation MK-UL-TRA, an experiment on unwitting Americans for testing mind-altering drugs such as LSD. Helms ordered records of the CIA's drug and mind control projects to be destroyed before he retired in 1973. McKenna discusses him for his role in the history of psychedelics.

Timothy Leary

Timothy Leary was a shamanic trickster and social scientist at Harvard. He tried to put the psychedelic experience on the social agenda by conducting experiments on the use of hallucinogens. Although his first psychedelic experience was with mushrooms, LSD was more accessible and less expensive, thus LSD became part of the Harvard psychedelic circle's repertoire.

Objects/Places

Psilocybin-containing mushrooms

Mushrooms with hallucinogenic properties. Often used in shamanic rituals and for mind-alteration purposes.

Tassili-n-Ajjer Plateau

A curious rock formation in the Sahara Desert of southern Algeria that houses rock paintings with depictions of shamans with domesticated cattle and mushrooms. Provides evidence of a human history of mushroom use.

Round Head Period

A period of human history named for the style in which humans were depicted in paintings. Likely started around the ninth millennium and ended before the seventh millennium B.C.E.

Soma

An ancient substance with psychedelic properties. Scholars have been unable to identify which plant Soma came from, although there is strong evidence pointing to a mushroom.

Cannabis

A multipurpose plant with psychoactive properties whose fibers could be used in weaving. Cannabis gained an unpopular reputation in modern history, but now perhaps could be a large agricultural crop in America.

Sugar

A refined source of sucrose coming from the sugarcane plant or sugar beet. Possibly the most socially-accepted source of addiction. Inspired the slave trade in the Caribbean.

Spices

Any assortment of leaves and bark that add flavor to food. Indicated as a major player in ending Medieval Times through its establishment of trade routes and connections to exotic locations.

Coffee

A berry with a long history. It was first crushed and eaten with foods. Later it was mixed with wine, brewed and roasted. Coffee contains large amounts of caffeine, a widely recognized stimulant. Despite its association with health problems, coffee and coffee addiction is widely accepted.

Tobacco

A plant whose leaves can be dried and smoked. Contains nicotine, an addictive psychoactive. Enjoys worldwide legalization, despite its unquestionable relationship with disease and health problems. Has a powerful lobbying industry.

Opium

A psychoactive drug with a long history. Raw opium comes from breaking open the seed capsule of the opium poppy plant. Can be ingested or smoked. Is the active substance in morphine and heroin. Is illegal in most parts of the world. Where it is not illegal, it is closely monitored and regulated.

Archaic Revival

A term the author uses to describe a return to an ancient lifestyle, one of a symbiotic relationship with plants, particularly of the hallucinogenic variety.

Themes

Dominator Culture

McKenna spends a good deal of the book discussing the role of human beings as dominators, or the dominator culture as he calls it. Dominator culture promotes inequality not only among human beings, but among nature's organisms. It supports the notion of human beings as superior beings who feel entitlement or an innate right to manipulate the world around them.

McKenna describes several examples of dominator attitudes. Some are very obvious, such as the enslaving of people to work in the production of sugarcane fields to feed the new sugar addiction. Some are less obvious, such as the hypocritical attitudes toward drugs (e.g. tobacco vs opium) that allow the culture to pick and choose values.

The dominator culture is particularly evident in sexual roles and stereotypes. Under the partnership model, group sexual activity was common and there was an open and non-proprietary approach to sexuality. In the dominator culture, however, men choose partners who are young and capable of bearing many children while women choose older men who are in control of many resources. This occurs because of a power imbalance. In a dominator culture, power is not distributed equally based on age, size and skill; a dominance hierarchy is maintained with relationships defined in terms of property and provisions, thus people are in competition for that power.

McKenna does not subscribe to the dominator mentality, merely recognizes its current existence and advocates against that model.

Magic in Food

McKenna argues that we are what we eat, but in a radically different sense. Plants play a role in mediating human culture and relationships. Not only do foods elicit specific emotional responses and behaviors, but they have also been found to contain medicinal properties.

It may be no coincidence that the neurotransmitters in the brain are very similar to the chemical structure of the indole hallucinogens found in psychoactive plants such as mushrooms. This similarity suggests a close relationship wherein the plant may easily become a part of the human and influence them in a multitude of ways.

McKenna argues that psilocybin-containing mushrooms are the missing link between our small-brained ancestors and today's modern human. Evolutionary biologists have failed to determine what could explain the unprecedented increase in brain size in a relatively short period of time when no other animals were experiencing such growth. McKenna offers the explanation that consuming mushrooms offered an advantage in

visual acuity that ultimately led to increased reproductive success and the further proliferation of mushroom-eating progeny.

Such compounds could also be responsible for changes in the brain processes and even its organization. These psychoactive properties acted as catalysts in imagination, creativity, and self-reflection. McKenna even suggests that the experience of intoxication from these plants may have even inspired the creation of language or a form of expression to share the experience.

Culture is a Matter of Habit

Culture plays an important role in the book, and McKenna argues that culture is a matter of habit. By this, McKenna means that beliefs are hereditary, passed on from one generation of society to the next, but culture can also be dynamic.

McKenna uses several different habits to demonstrate how it shapes culture. Caffeine consumption is a habit acquired by many Americans. The drinking of coffee is seldom for the taste, but for the stimulant properties of caffeine. Caffeine rituals, or habits, such as the coffee break are widely accepted and seldom shunned. In that sense, human beings have created caffeine consumption as part of reasonable culture.

On the other end of the spectrum of examples, the notion of other drug use as "recreational" creates the connotation that it is not a habit or part of daily maintenance even though McKenna believes that most humans would benefit from participating in mind-body explorations. Relegating the activity of using psychoactives to connect to the plant world as "recreational" discourages the adoption of a drug culture.

McKenna notes that it is difficult to change culture when the current one is that of the dominator culture, which encourages authoritarianism and discourages the questioning of ideas. Thus if humans are not asked to adopt the habit of exploring thoughts, specifically with the use of mind-altering substances, the dominator culture will unfortunately remain.

Style

Perspective

"Food of the Gods: The Search for the Original Tree of Knowledge" is a non-fiction book that uses both third and first person narrative. The author, Terence McKenna, uses first-person narrative when he details accounts of his personal experiences. He has worked and lived with shamans and has explored the usages and effects of hallucinogenic plants and will often describe such memories. At times, he will refer to "we" as a society or as modern human beings in discussing the present and future steps that need to be taken.

At times, McKenna also becomes a storyteller, inventing situations or recreating an imagined history in order to illustrate a point. During these moments, which are usually at the beginning of the chapter, customs or cultures are portrayed by fictional characters, such the steps of a shamanic ritual. McKenna discusses the history of human evolution and society, and in doing so, needs to step into the role of the third-person narrator reiterating facts.

McKenna has devoted much time and work to shamanism and plants. Although the book is non-fiction and supported with direct quotes from the notes and findings of others, it is very clear what the author's opinion is; thus, is it difficult to believe he is telling the whole story. McKenna has a clear agenda, to return society to a closer, symbiotic relationship with plants that he calls the Archaic Revival, and the research he presents support his claims. However, this approach makes one question what evidence he chose not to present. It is very clear that the author has a bias, but the transparency of his statements allow the reader to make up his or her own mind as to whether the argument is compelling enough.

Tone

The author sets a very controversial tone in the book. He writes using very opinionated language and words to support his ideas and beliefs. For example, this sentence makes several claims without qualifications or irrefutable supporting evidence: "Medieval Europe was one of the most constipated, neurotic, and woman-hating societies ever to exist." Sentences such as these clearly demonstrate his viewpoint and direction he believes the evidence points.

However, McKenna also plays the role of a story-teller, describing the lives of those living in shamanistic cultures and the experiences of those who explore plant-human connections. He uses vivid language in describing colors, emotions and feelings. He not only discusses the concept of synesthesia, the experience of a stimuli of one sense inducing a response to another sense, but provides a personal example of it. In these

ways, he applies a softer tone, one of a teacher trying to communicate his ideas to a student.

Although it is clear what the author believes, he never criticizes or insults the reader for not coming to the same conclusion. He seems to understand that most people view the world based on societal norms and teachings and that his ideas of an Archaic Revival were likely never introduced to the reader. He aims to make a strong argument for his perspective but spends the majority of the book discussing history and anthropological evidence, indicating that, in the end, the reader can choose what he or she wants to believe.

Structure

The structure of the book is that it is organized into three parts, each with five to six medium length chapters of ten to thirty pages. The chapters are split into about five to ten subheadings; however, the organization of topics does not always have a good flow, thus making the text difficult to read at times.

The author includes many direct quotes from various sources and experts in the field. When parts are quoted, it is frequently a long block of text. Sometimes the writing style of these secondary sources is Old English, making terms and sentence structure unfamiliar to the reader.

The outline of the book is to demonstrate the growing distance of human beings from hallucinogenic plants and nature in general. The first part is devoted to establishing the symbiotic relationship our ancestors once had with plants and cites various uses of hallucinogenic foods as acceptable parts of culture. The second part documents early civilizations and their uses of intoxicants. Finally, the third part focuses on human attitudes to and addictions of certain drugs in our search for substitutions.

Overall, the organization of the text and the categorizations of thematic information could have been better and hampered efforts to read and understand the material.

Quotes

"No change is permanent, each gives way to yet another" (p. 17)

"To seek to understand human beings is to seek to understand their uniqueness." (p. 45)

"Medieval Europe was one of the most constipated, neurotic, and woman-hating societies ever to exist." (p. 170)

"We are culturally and linguistically blind to the world of forces and interconnections clearly visible to those who have retained the Archaic relationship to nature." (p. 8)

"The impact of hallucinogens in the diet has been more than psychological; hallucinogenic plants may have been the catalysts for everything about us that distinguishes us from other higher primates, for the mental functions that we associate with humanness." (p. 52)

"History is the story of our unfocused agony over the loss of the perfect human world, and then our forgetting it altogether, denying it and in doing so, denying a part of ourselves." (p. 138)

"An at its fullest, shamanism is not simply a religion, it is a dynamic connection into the totality of life on the planet." (p. 61)

"Yet, as a society we are not ready to discuss the possibility of self-managed addictions and the possibility of intelligently choosing the plants we ally ourselves to." (p. 166)

"An drug introduced into use inevitably winds up associated with a number of quack medical theories and treatments." (p. 198)

"To the point of public awareness of issues concerning drugs has been lacking and public opinion easily manipulated." (p. 244)

"In the United States, the federal government's zeal to appear to wish to eradicate drugs is directly linked to the degree to which the government has been co-opted by the values of fundamental Christianity." (p. 266)

"Indeed, the tea and coffee break is the only drug ritual that has never been criticized by those who profit from the modern industrial state." (p. 185)

"An open and nonproprietary approach to sexuality is fundamental to the partnership model." (p. 65)

Topics for Discussion

McKenna notes on several occasions the presence of a "dominator style." He mainly uses it to reference the dominator, rather than symbiotic, relationship human beings have with plants and nature. In what other ways and situations could modern day humans be described as being dominators?

McKenna discusses the role plants once played in human culture and development and advocates a return to that kind of relationship. What are some advantages of an "Archaic Revival"? What are some disadvantages?

The world view of opium is very different from that of tobacco, despite both their addictive properties. Do you think one is "worse" than the other? Explain how each should be viewed and why.

The author writes that sugar is perhaps the most damaging addiction known to man due to its superfluous nutrition and role in slavery. Do you agree or disagree? Support your answer

The author talks about several very controversial ideas, and it is clear what his opinion is. Was his argument compelling? Why or why not? (list specific examples or suggestions)

McKenna believes that the psychedelic issue is a civil rights and civil liberties issue. Present an argument for either agreement or disagreement.

The author proposes that humans crave the symbiotic relationship they used to have with plants and have tried to replace it with other substitutes, sometimes of the man-made variety. Do you think there is a difference between synthetic and natural drugs? Is one better or worse than the other?

McKenna quotes the saying "Variety is the spice of life." What examples can you think of that demonstrate the human being;s need for variety?