

how to become a human being



entheogens, youth & indigenous society

daniel waterman

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Abstract

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- *conclusion, disclaimer, endnotes, sources*

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Abstract:

It was in the forced institutionalized transformation of the children entrusted to their care that the masters of indian schools blundered like sculptors ignoring the inherent qualities of their material, inadvertently reducing their creation to rubble. (Ronald Niezen: *Spirit Wars* ISBN 0520219872)

This paper aims to evaluate indigenous peoples strategies for educating the young, and to compare such strategies with those employed by modern society. In order to examine the vast difference of attitudes between such societies, I shall focus on the employment of entheogenic substances for purposes of initiation. Such practices once limited to alienated and subjugated societies, is spreading as knowledge of indigenous practices increases.

I shall examine how growing awareness of the use of entheogens (particularly through participation experiences) has impacted on particular areas of anthropological research, and traverses the gap between academic research to powerfully confront western concepts (1) I shall examine the means by which indigenous knowledge is being communicated, and the implications that this has for the global community.

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Introduction

Growing up in any society is a complex and challenging process. It is fraught with difficulties, dangers and trials, but it also provides the young person with the means to become a happy person who is respected and appreciated by the community he or she lives in.

Societies that place great value on the individual and teaching him or her how to fit in, without coercing or impeding their freedom of choice still exist today, but they are a tiny minority of the global community. These are the societies of indigenous people, whose customs and way of seeing the world are severely under threat today from logging companies, oil exploitation, slash burning of their forests, and sadly from the very violence that permeates western (global) culture.

In this essay I will try to explain how such violence is inherent to the attitudes of western society, its mode d'existence, its production methods, its religions and beliefs, and particularly the its education of the young.

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By questioning this education and examining the type of individual it produces, I hope to be able to argue the question whether 'primitive' customs are not in fact far more humane than we presume, and whether we should not be looking towards such customs in search of new ways to instill a community spirit and a social conscience in our children.

If there is one lesson we can learn from indigenous peoples it is most certainly that the education of the young determines the quality of our future survival. Though life in such indigenous societies is deemed barbaric, primitive and hard, some customs particularly those of the initiation of young men and women into adulthood attest to their very humaneness.

The use of entheogenic substances in initiation provides a medium for comparisons between indigenous and urban/modern models, for it is precisely such customs that were ruthlessly condemned by the conquistadors, the missionaries and the inquisitors, who in their persecution of indigenous customs signaled the legitimacy of their people's complete destruction¹.

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Attitudes towards such indigenous customs have changed little since then, albeit that a few remaining indigenous communities have finally been allowed to practice their traditional ceremonies with Peyotl (the Native American Church) and other entheogens. This permission was gained without any recognition of the inherent character of such substances, simply on the grounds that western society has finally had to admit: that the persecution of indigenous peoples and their customs actually contradicts the basic tenets of our own self-proclaimed constitutions. This is one reason why the use of Peyotl is permitted to Native Americans, while white people who wish to participate in such ceremonies (often out of a very profound spiritual sense) are prohibited from doing so!

This brings us to the important question: what happens when people from modern urban society become involved in such traditional practices, particularly the use of entheogens? This has happened most notably in the case of the Brazillian church of Santo Daime, which brings together a mix of indigenous practices (the use of Ayahuasca) and Catholic worship, in a syncretic form that is practiced in many urban areas of Brazil.

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Such practices have now also spread to European and North American cities, Japan and further.

While the use of such substances remained limited to indigenous communities living on the fringes of affluent society there was no need to confront issues of legitimacy or ethics, however the time when such practices could remain within certain boundaries has been and gone, the global community has become a great marketplace of goods, information and the exchange of ideas, and with the advent of cheap airfares and instant communication the traditional barriers (time and space) to the influx of foreign goods, ideas, beliefs, diseases and customs are gone. The Internet has provided a neutral area of communication in which particular ideas tend to surface with great velocity, and there is nothing that can be done to stop it.

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At last count the name Ayahuasca (an Amazonian entheogen) brought up 215,000 entries on the Google search engine. Peyote: 415,000, Iboga: 45,000 and 143,000 for Psilocybin. Such numbers do not accurately reflect use, instead they point to the great number of people who have felt inspired to write about entheogens. By comparison I ran a search on the word 'guns' and got 20,400,000 results (!) (War: 226,000,000) The fact is that the suppression of entheogens and knowledge about them is no longer an option. Far more intriguing is the question what message such substances are conveying and whether the entheogens and the customs and traditions that belong with them bear any relevance to global society?

It is widely acknowledged that global society, the consumerist *free market* that is spreading out of control all over the globe, is in deep crisis. That crisis could be summed up as the sum total of a great number of conflicting desires. What remains to be acknowledged is that the progress of modernisation is really *beyond the control of individuals and of our governing institutions.*

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This lack of control means that we as a global community are failing to plan what type of future we will have, and as the processes of modernity gather momentum, the point at which the whole fabric of society will be irreparably rent is approaching. Such signs may be found not in apocalyptic visions of giant Tsunamis, but in simple things such as the widespread use of firearms, the corruption that permeates vulnerable societies and the lack of freedom of speech in such modern societies as China. Even where freedom of speech is guaranteed by constitution, such as in the US, the power of individuals to protest is under threat from Multinationals like MacDonald's (1) and this serves to illustrate that competition between the desires of the many, threatens the need for a humanistic society.

This discrepancy between the sum total effect of many people attempting to exercise their freedom (expressed as consumer choice) and the needs of the many for security, peace, freedom and cooperation is a reflection both of the type of society we are brought up in, and of the *type of individuals we are*. It reflects our human nature, as well as what we have been educated to believe.

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In previous essays I have described how personal trauma relating to the way we enter into existence (the birth process) plays a powerful role in how we react to input from parents, peers, educators, authorities and so on. Such influences from the birth process, (psychodynamic) could be termed as existential conditions and they are more or less universal.

I have also described transformational processes, these are processes that the individual may or may not embark upon in an attempt to transform him or herself, through cognitive methods and or the raising of awareness. Such processes often do end in a real transformation of the individual, but they contain the potential to play a significant role in society, enabling us to take control of a situation that many of us feel is beyond our control at present.

For an adult person who is already severely traumatised by existential conditions as well as the denial of individuality that begins with his/her induction into the education system for the purpose of producing a productive member of society (and not a happy person) the path that leads to the resolution of such problems is far more complex and daunting than for an individual brought up with a

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‘respectful’ regard for himself (such as in indigenous community) The use of entheogenic substances in the initiation of children in indigenous society provides a mechanism that guarantees the success of an individual within that society. By considering the various aspects of such rituals I am not proposing that we in the west adopt similar measures, but that aspects of such rituals may inform us what we are doing wrong in our education of the young.

The education of young people has been the subject of extensive debate for at least the past 500 years. Today’s modern institutions have become super machines churning out productive knowledgeable individuals, but perhaps the purposes of education have to some extent been lost as multinationals and the demands of consumer societies have begun to intrude on what is being taught. That is one reason why college campuses depend on stipendiums and donations from industry (no logo) and certain faculties are shut down as no longer fundable or proffitable.

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What should be the purpose of primary education? Is it simply the preparation of so many worker bees or is it that we aim to instill a proper regard for the moral and ethical values of our society, for intelligence and wisdom, for curiosity and imagination, for knowing how to live well, and how to be happy?

The trials and tribulations of modern society are such that by an early age many individuals have become so utterly demoralised that they turn to drugs, violence, prostitution and even those who do not turn to such illegal activities may be said to display the symptoms of unhappiness: boredom, lack of concentration, lack of ambition, lack of curiosity empathy and compassion. Such individuals become materialistic and any position of power they may achieve becomes merely a modus operandi for expression of their complete and utter powerlessness. This situation is universal but the former Soviet bloc was notorious for churning out such individuals, aptly named apparatchiks. One of the great myths of our time has been that only repressive regimes turn out such individuals, and that consumer choice and a certain level of income produces a happier individual.

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The proper education of the young results in members of society feeling empowered, and this sense of confidence in themselves inspires them to behave in ways that reflect the respect that they have received. In reading about indigenous societies one of the things that has made a great impression on me is an almost total lack of punishment or authority towards the young. Societies in which material wealth and possessions are trivial do not need to punish their young for transgressions (2), in fact, the type of transgressions that such youngsters perform usually punish themselves (playing with fire, touching a snake) Inherent to this lack of punishment is a respectful attitude that says that youngsters will have to learn if they wish to survive, and that they should learn from experience rather than from prohibition. This quickly instills a proper respect for elders, who have after all survived the many dangers of their environment.

This laissez faire attitude is not a characteristic of the manner in which youngsters in such societies are inducted into the spiritual life of the community.

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In such matters very much care is given to preparation, tests (the initiation) and a proper reception (acknowledgement) of the individuals efforts. It is obvious that such communities regard such educative initiations as the very basis for their survival as communities. A failure to educate the young is not so much a failure in obligation to the past (ancestors tradition) but a failure towards the future.

The earth does not belong to us,
we have it on loan from our children.

(Chief Seattle: see illustration)

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