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Hallucinogenic Music

An Analysis of the Role of Whistling in Peruvian Ayahuasca Healing Sessions

DISCUSSION OF THE USE of hallucinogenic drugs in primitive and peasant healing and religious activities has appeared in scattered anthropological literature for many years. With the exception of some studies on peyote and a few other drugs, however, anthropologists have paid little attention to the crucial role that music plays in structuring the area of culturally determined subjective experience arising from drug-induced states.¹

This paper, based on an analysis of ayahuasca whistling incantations collected in the Peruvian Amazonian city of Iquitos and taped during a hallucinogenic healing session on August 10, 1968, will attempt to examine the very important place that music has in evoking particular visionary-type experiences in the wake of plant hallucinogenic use. It is believed that such studies are important in clarifying the often-neglected determinancy that music has in many non-Western societies, where powerful mind-altering substances have been used to heal, to communicate with the supernatural, and to open up worlds of heaven and hell.²

Ethnographic Data

One of the authors (Dobkin de Ríos) spent a year studying psychotherapy with the woody vine ayahuasca in the Peruvian Amazon city of Iquitos, situated some 2,300 miles inland from the Atlantic Ocean.³ Here, as in many other regions of Peru, various plant hallucinogens have a long history of use in healing ac-

¹ Marlene Dobkin de Ríos, "Cultural Variables Effecting Drug-Induced Altered States of Consciousness," in *Proceedings*, 39th International Congress of Americanists, Lima (in press).

² In Western society, the best discussion of the importance of the nonverbal in drug-adjuncted psychotherapy can be found in Betty Eisner, "The Importance of the Non-Verbal," in *The Use of LSD in Psychotherapy and Alcoholism*, ed. Harold Abramson (New York, 1967), 542-560.

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tivities.⁴ A potion prepared from boiling ayahuasca (belonging to various species of *Banisteriopsis* and often mixed with additional psychedelics containing either indolic substances or datura), is administered by a healer, called *ayahuasquero*, to a group of patients in evening sessions that are held generally in jungle clearings on the outskirts of the city. Treatment of illness is set within a matrix of magical beliefs concerning disease etiology. Most infirmities that mark the populations of urbanized, civilized Indians (called *cholos*) or middle-class mestizo populations from surrounding urban and rural areas, can be classified as emotional or psychological in origin. They correspond to the general success that other folk healers around the world appear to have in treating such illnesses.⁵ Illness is believed to be caused by the capricious whim of offended spirits of nature, or else attributed to the evil of people, who for motives of envy, revenge, or plain meanness pay a witch to cause horrendous damage to another person. The main purpose of the powerful plant hallucinogen ayahuasca, when used in healing, is diagnostic and revelatory. During the course of the therapeutic session, a patient is given a drink to induce visions which will permit him to see just what force or individual is deemed responsible for evildoing. It is only then that the evil magic causing illness is believed to be deflected or neutralized by the healer and returned to its perpetrator.

Ayahuasca Music: Its Setting and Analysis

Foremost in importance in the healing session, the psychedelic potion is distributed by the healer to those seated around a circle. His primary role is that of guide. He whistles special incantations or at times sings. On occasion he may accompany himself with a rattle made from the leaves of a plant, called schacapa (*Cerbera peruviana*), which are tied together at their base by a thin vine. The healer is generally skilled in the preparation and administration of the infusion and the interpretation of the ayahuasca visions.

There is real difficulty inherent in recording and analyzing this type of musical data. For one thing drug-induced, altered states of consciousness are often qualitatively different from other ceremonial behavior with which anthropologists work. Attending festivals in jungle hamlets or in city settlements where dancing, drinking and gaiety abounded, presented the junior author with no difficulties whatsoever in establishing rapport and obtaining musical tapes. However, although contact was made with about ten healers during the year's fieldwork, only one would permit recording of his music. Technical problems such as the movement of the healer around the circle, the general quietude and augmented sensitivity to sounds inherent in the drug state, and the general disinclination for one and all to probe, ask questions, or engage in inconsequential verbalized behavior made it less than easy to obtain the type of data that might really be useful in correlating particular musical modes with types of hallucinatory vision.

⁴ Marlene Dobkin de Ríos, "Folk Curing with a Psychedelic Cactus in Northern Peru," *International Journal of Social Psychiatry*, 15 (1968), 23-32; "Banisteriopsis Used in Witchcraft and Healing Activities in Iquitos, Peru," *Economic Botany*, 24 (July, 1970), 296-300.

⁵ Ari Kiev, ed., *Magic, Faith and Healing: Studies in Primitive Psychiatry Today* (Glencoe, Ill., 1964).

A

(short pause)

B

FADE

A1

C

repeated 3 times

D



[E] = 143 [A]



CODA

Rit



Description of a Session

The music analyzed here was taped during a session conducted by Don José, a fairly successful ayahuasca healer who lived in an outlying section of Iquitos. Present were seven people and the healer. Each patient was selected by the curer himself, and tended not to be known to the other patients in attendance. The session was held in the healer's orchard, somewhat removed from the noises of passing cars or howling dogs. He was accompanied by one apprentice, whom he had previously healed, and who also whistled with him a series of traditional ayahuasca melodies. Most healers during their period of apprenticeship (which can last several years), seclude themselves in open jungle, learning the effects of different plants on their bodies, and how to prepare special tonics, medicines, salves, and the like. They work closely with a teacher, who instructs them in traditional melodies. Basic melodies are learned during this period, although healers tend to improvise and innovate on these themes once they take up their own practice.

In this particular session, the whistling began right after the drug potion was given by the healer to his patients and continued throughout most of the session, which lasted from approximately 9:00 P.M. until 1:00 A.M. the following morning. Interspersed was occasional counseling by the healer to each of several patients. Some patients were not given the drink because of the nature of their illness, which may have been chronic or debilitating. On occasion, a healer will advise a patient to forego the drug experience until he has taken the purge himself to see the nature of the illness.

Since much of the music found in ayahuasca sessions consists of whistling incantations, it is important to mention the widespread belief in the area that whistling is the way in which the spiritual forces of nature and the guardian spirit of the vine, itself, can be evoked by the healer.

Explanation of the Whistling Incantations

- Section A:* This represents the beginning of the taped ceremony. The melody is nonmetrical and pentatonic, with intermittent grace notes E *b* to E *h*. The mode consists of the notes C, D, E, G, and A. The tonic in this instance is C. Throughout Section *A*, the tonic note C is reached by the starting note G. Brackets in Section *A*, line 2, mean that those notes are very faint and uneven in duration.
- Section A1:* Continues in much the same fashion.
- Metronomic Marking:* One quarter note = 148 pulses per minute.
- Section B:* In this section, the tonic note C is reached by the starting note E. According to the musical data, the tonic note C is never reached as a final cadence. Rather, the tone G is predominant in this section.
- Section C:* This represents a musically repeated motif which is metrical, interspersed between Sections *B* and *A1*. Note the symbol  represents a short pause.

Metronomic Marking: One quarter note = 148 pulses per minute.

Section D: Note that bracketed notes in *D* represent a pivotal musical phrase that predominates throughout this section. Also specially annotated in this section is ↓, signifying that the actual sound is lower than the written note.

Section E: This section, interestingly enough, is a hexatonic scale, as contrasted to the early pentatonic scale. The melody contained herein has, we suspect, a close relationship and possible derivation from Amazonian rain forest melodies. Note the $\frac{3}{4}$ bar, which appears just prior to the repetition of the melody. The melodic structure in this starting section can be fragmented into sub-structures *A*, *B*, *A* and coda.

Metronomic Marking: One quarter note = 148 pulses per minute.

Comments

Ayahuasca music is utilized only in drug ceremonies. There is a considerable corpus of music that falls within the realm of festival music, either commemorating happy occasions such as religious holidays within the Roman Catholic Church, or else melodies that are played during wakes, when friends and relatives accompany the body of the deceased throughout an evening to dawn vigil. These melodies are generally played with a drum (*tambor*), *quena* (wooden reedless flute found in the Andean highlands), and a four-string violin, probably of Spanish origin.

It is tempting to suggest a comparison between ayahuasca whistling incantations as discussed in this article and such music as the Gregorian chants, at least insofar as basic function goes. Just as one can argue that Gregorian chants and ecclesiastical modes represent tonal relationships in which scales are structured so as to evoke a spiritual experience within the context of Christianity, so too might the ayahuasca music be viewed as an essential component of a nonordinary reality sustained by the sensory overload inherent in drug-induced alteration in consciousness. Such music cannot be divorced from its social context. We should reflect, for a moment, on the nature of hallucinogenic experience, per se, and the quality of reality alteration for the individual. Such phenomena as the slowing down or changing of time perception must be related to how music is perceived by the individual under the effects of the powerful alkaloids, harmine and harmaline, present in the ayahuasca potion. The number of metronomic markings listed earlier may not, indeed, be perceived as they would in an ordinary state.

The junior author's experience under ayahuasca pointed up some interesting aspects of the relationship of the music and the content of visions. At first, visions were very fast moving and difficult to focus upon, as the mind's eye filled with a rather complex and detailed panorama of primary colors and variegated forms. This effect perhaps could be correlated with her perception of the speed of the healer's music. The healer then slowed down his pace, and a full-sized portrait, so to speak, of a woman appeared before her. This dramatic representation of a

person, who under other circumstances might have been identified by a given healer as the person responsible for bewitchment, could most definitely be related to the velocity of the healer's whistling incantations and use of his schacapa rattle in rhythmic motions. Visions do change frequently from fast to slow, and are controlled and evoked by the healer, who is the creative force in deciding which melodies to call upon. When further into the drug experience, one of the authors experienced nausea and heavy vomiting. The healer's attentions included reassurance that his continuing melodies would alleviate the nausea and cause it to pass away.

Both healer and patient in the course of the drug session take ayahuasca together. The healer, however, is generally quite occupied in the performance of his ritual activities. This includes blowing tobacco smoke over the bodies of his patients and occasionally sucking at a dolorous area to extract a thorn magically believed to have been introduced by an evil witch. The patient is generally left seated by himself for major portions of the ceremony and only occasionally counseled and treated directly by the healer.

Healers state it is their decision as to which melodies to elect that evokes certain types of visions. As mentioned above, slower incantations may be responsible for the often-reported visions of men and women who are later identified as evil-doers. Perhaps—and one must remain at a speculative level here—faster incantations are crucial in the changeover from one reality to another. Such sensory overload has been frequently reported to produce anxiety in the individual, especially in initial drug-induced states. In Western society, LSD-like substances have been utilized in psychotherapy, often by Freudian-oriented analysts. Vomiting and nausea, which may occur in such cases, have occasionally been related to the inability of individuals to deal with anxiety generated by rapid access to unconscious realms. One Peruvian psychiatrist, making a presumptive diagnosis of an ayahuasca session in the mid-1960s, stated that approximately 75 percent of initial ayahuasca ingestions result in heavy vomiting or nausea.⁶ In fact, ayahuasca is locally referred to as the purge, because of this frequent side effect. To return to the role of music during this anxiety state, it may be that the whistling incantations help carry the individual more easily into this second realm.

In addition, one major facet of drug-induced experience is the role that the guide or guru plays as an important other to whom the patient may turn in the anxious or highly suggestible state that accompanies his alteration in consciousness. Masters and Houston, in an authoritative volume, discuss the vital place of the guru in guiding such sessions.⁷ It is possible that the patient's augmented suggestibility encounters, in the presence of the healer, a creative source and origin of music, which alleviates anxiety, tranquilizes, and causes a turning inward by the musical evocation of particular visions.

From a musicological point of view, we might also suggest that the preponderance of the tone G could be viewed as the dominant or active tone away from the tonic C. Perhaps this contrastive situation potentiates the activity of the ayahuasca

⁶ Personal communication, Dr. Oscar Ríos Reátegui.

⁷ R. E. L. Masters, and Jean Houston, *The Varieties of Psychedelic Experience* (New York, 1966), ch. 5.

alkaloids. As a final comment, we might note that in the experience of the field researcher, lack of vision in various ayahuasca sessions could generally be correlated with inadequate musical ability on the part of particular healers.

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