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CHRISTIAN RÄTSCH

BRIDGES TO THE GODS (\*)  
(PSYCHEDELIC RITUALS OF KNOWLEDGE)

**Abstract** - CHRISTIAN RÄTSCH - Bridges to the Gods. (Psychedelic rituals of knowledge).

The Author, starting from the concept of «Bridges to the Gods» as a metaphor for internal paths to the spiritual worlds, analyzes the psychedelic rituals in an ethnographic context. They serve the quest of knowledge and not a mere therapeutic effect. They also almost always involve the use of psychoactive substances. The Author proposes a classification of the psychedelic rituals of knowledge in typological categories. The basic structure of the rituals is divided into three phases (Preparation, Implementation and Integration), corresponding to some internal processes and external acts.

**Key words:** Psychedelic, Ritual of knowledge.

**Riassunto** - CHRISTIAN RÄTSCH - Ponti verso gli Dei. Rituali psichedelici di conoscenza.

L'Autore, partendo dal concetto di «ponte verso gli Dei» come metafora per un percorso interno verso i mondi spirituali, analizza, in un contesto etnografico, le strutture dei rituali psichedelici (quasi sempre implicanti l'uso di sostanze psicoattive e tesi alla conoscenza piuttosto che ad un mero effetto terapeutico) tentandone una suddivisione in categorie tipologiche. Per quanto concerne poi la struttura di base, essa viene scissa in tre fasi (Preparazione, Esecuzione ed Integrazione), ognuna corrispondente a diversi processi interni ed atti esteriori.

**Parole chiave:** Psichedelici, Rituali di Conoscenza.

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«The riders shall lay the whip to their horses,  
cross the bridges and gallop on!  
I build the bridge of heaven and the bridge of earth.  
I erect a bridge between this world and the next  
I raise the bridge of the three levels and the  
bridge of the seven stars...».

Invocation of a Yao Shaman  
(LEMOINE 1989:98)

This paper (1) represents an attempt to shed light upon a *healthy* side of psychedelics. In doing so, reference will be made to psychedelic rituals of knowledge which are considered within an ethnographic context. Rituals are external acts designed to trigger internal processes. There are all types of rituals; here, I shall restrict the discussion to those which serve the quest for knowledge. Rituals of this type do not necessarily serve in healing the sick or in psychotherapy, but are chiefly for obtaining insights into otherwise hidden aspects of reality.

Such rituals are primarily for healthy persons. In the nonwestern world, the use of psychedelics is much more important and beneficial for the healthy than the sick. In the following pages, I will point out ways in which healthy persons can have *healthy* experiences which bring them knowledge. The perspective I will adhere to reflects anthropological insights into the relativity of both culture and personality.

The concept of *bridge* is fraught with symbolic meaning, and is an image which is often encountered in the ethnographic context (HANSMANN n.d.; LEMOINE 1989). In the West African Iboga cult, references are made to a «bridge to the ancestors» (FERNANDEZ 1982). South American shamans traverse a «bridge of smoke» or a «bridge of coca» (MARTIN 1969). The bridge symbol, in fact, appears to be a cross-cultural constant:

All of the great religions culminate in the image of the enlightened one who flees the world, ultimately experiencing himself in contemplation, suffering, and renunciation as a bridge between the hallucinatory message which is granted him and the people to whom he tells that which has been revealed. In following his way, the believers also experience him directly as a bridge to healing. Shamanism knows of a special dispatching of the soul. It appears to leave the body to seek advice and be granted inspiration through contact with demons and primordial powers. The one who is called has predestined himself for this mission by a long path of loneliness,

illness, and ecstasy, which make him capable of an hysterically intensified ability to experience. Musical excitation, rhythmic motor movements, and special sacral stimulants then effect the separation of soul and body, which the shaman himself is able to sense and described as a journey and a bridge (HANSMANN n.d.: 86).

This journey may be across a rainbow bridge to the Milky Way or to Valhalla. These bridges, of course, are not visible structures, but are internal paths to spiritual worlds. Yet a bridge does not merely provide passage across an abyss to a new shore. A bridge is a way to knowledge, a path which may be entered by means of certain substances or plants. A bridge is a possibility which enables a person who seeks knowledge to come to those who provide it - the gods and the goddesses.

*Gods* and *goddesses* are beings which can be encountered by any person, albeit not within the visible world. They are beings who act within a world that is normally closed and imperceptible to us. Through magic, a person can control the world by causing the invisible to exert influence upon the visible (RÄTSCH 1985).

The greatest effects are achieved when a person asks the gods to do this. Yet how can one see that which is normally invisible? One sees more than the world of everyday reality when one ingests a substance with psychedelic effects.

The term *psychedelic* precisely characterizes the intention of these traditional rituals of knowledge: the manifestation of hidden dimensions of the psyche. It should be noted that when a person uses a psychedelic, she should not become fragmented, but more integrated. She should not experience the world as something demonic; rather, her new experience of the world should show her the *proper way to live*.

Most psychedelics are alkaloids (indoles,  $\beta$ -carbolines, tryptamines, phenethylamines), and most come from plants (RÄTSCH 1991). Yet a few come from the animal kingdom, such as the foam of the toad *Bufo alvarius*, which contains 5-MeO-DMT. Among many cultures, plants or plant products which have psychedelic effects have become known as «plants of the gods», «food of the gods», «ambrosia», «flesh of the gods», etc. (SCHULTES & HOFMANN, 1980).

Such plants provide access to that domain of human experience or behavior which the western world calls *religion*, religious experience, or mysticism. In the languages of many nonwestern societies, e.g., the Mayan language of the Lacandon Indians, the word «religion» does not exist, nor is there an equivalent concept. Similarly, there is no word for «belief». Does this mean that these people have no religion? In the western sense, in which religion is often a product of leisure possessing a hobby character and detached from everyday life, they do indeed lack religion. They do not *believe* in gods; they do not *acknowledge* any gods. They *know* that the gods exist. They also *know* which gods exist, what they look like, what their personalities are, and can recognize the effects that

(1) I like to dedicate this paper to Dr. Albert Hofmann who celebrates his 85th Birthday in January 1991.

these gods have upon the world within which they live. What is more, their knowledge is not passively limited to the functions which these gods fulfill in the universe, they also know how to actively contact them - they know the paths that must be tread in order to meet the gods. This ethnographic truth, which tells us that there is not so much religion as there is a knowledge of divine effects, forms the basis for understanding psychedelic rituals of knowledge.

A metaphor will help us grasp the meaning of psychedelic rituals of knowledge. This metaphor is the *bridge to the gods*, a bridge which represents a path to *knowledge*. Like any bridge, it must be stable and secure. An unstable bridge is too unsafe to walk upon or traverse. Bridges must be crossed with trust and respect. Similarly, the path to knowledge must be traversed with trust and persistence. Ritual provides a type of *vehicle*, like a car, while the psychedelic provides the *fuel*. If we wish to safely cross the entire bridge, our vehicle must be in full working order. If our vehicle breaks down in the middle of the bridge, we will not reach our destination - the gods. When conducting a psychedelic ritual, knowledge concerning the preparation and dosage of the substance to be used is of decisive importance. Otherwise, *un necessary* accidents may occur.

To summarize: The bridge represents the path to knowledge. The person seeking knowledge stands at one end of the bridge, while the gods wait at the other. The destination is insight - knowledge into the secrets of existence. Ritual provides the vehicle, and the psychedelic provides the fuel.

Let us now turn to the structure of psychedelic rituals of knowledge, and ask what kinds there are. The following typology represents a first attempt to categorize rituals of this nature.

## MYSTERIES

Mysteries are ritual communities or cultic associations the focus of which is a shared vision of the gods, knowledge of the gods, or knowledge of true reality. The most famous mysteries are those of antiquity (e.g., the Eleusinian mysteries, the mysteries of the cult of Isis and Osiris, the Dionysian mysteries at Pompeii; cfr. MEYER 1987). In rituals of this type, psychedelics or other psychoactive substances enable the participants to discern the gods and to recognize and understand the influence which they have upon the world (WASSON et al. 1984). The aim of initiation into a mystery is not to heal the sick (although miraculous recoveries often occur), but rather to offer normal, healthy persons the chance to learn something about their station in the world as well as their place in the universe. Mysteries are concerned with providing answers to questions of the greatest import: *Who are we? Where do we come from? Where are we going? What does it all mean?*

## LIBATIONS

Libations occur collectively within a ritual community (HUBER 1929). Cults practicing rituals of this type aim at producing a simultaneous and communal altered state of consciousness. The participants should attain this state together, and should contact the gods as a group. The shift in consciousness aims at attracting the gods to earth and into the circle of participants. The Greek *symposium* (= «a drinking together»), known from the writings of Plato, is one type of ritual libation. Here, the leader of the symposium determined the nature and amounts of the substances (wine, water, herbs) which were to be given to the group. Other typical libations include the Indo-European rituals in which soma or haoma were consumed (FLATTERY & SCHWARTZ 1989). During these rituals, the participants assembled outdoors. It was said, «man is the temple, and in man we recognize god, and in order to make this possible, we drink soma». A fire was lit within the circle of participants and the beverage was handed around. The participants then sang about their visions (many of these songs may be found in the *Rig Veda*). The mead carousal of the Germanic tribes had a similar meaning. The group consumed the mead (a brew of honey, water, and such «bitter herbs» as henbane or wild rosemary) in order to experience group inebriation, so that the gods would come among the drinkers.

## RITUAL CIRCLES

A ritual circle is not a ritual intended for a cult community (MÜLLER-EBELING & RÄTSCH 1987, 1990; JONES & MATTHEWS 1990). It is a ritual which in and of itself attracts only those persons who feel called to attend. In the peyote rituals of the North American Indians, the members of a community are not summoned to a religious service. Only those who are actually searching for knowledge and wish to travel the *peyote road* will come to one of the nocturnal peyote meetings (STEWART 1987). The *veladas*, the mushroom ceremonies of the Mexican Indians in which mushrooms (*Psilocybe spp.*) with psychedelic effects are communally eaten, are similar (WASSON 1980). These rituals do not serve personal knowledge alone, but also the healing of the sick.

Many healthy persons will take part in a *velada*, for the ritual will strengthen their health and further their progress on the path to the gods. The healthy people call the gods, for the sick may no longer have the strength. When the gods appear, they are asked to heal the sick, to protect the healthy from illness and loss, and to reveal the secrets of the past, present, and future.

## VISION QUESTS

A vision quest is a personal ritual not linked to any cult (DRURY 1989). As a result, this type of ritual is not concerned with the culturally supported gods, but rather with the recognition of one's own personal god. The intention is for a person to experience the personal aspect of his relationship to the universe and recognize and comprehend the vision he receives as a signpost for his life and his actions. A person on a vision quest may facilitate the desired vision by means of fasting, ordeals, or psychedelics.

## INCANTATIONS

Incantations are rituals intended to conjure up a god, goddess, or demon. Not only is the person who conducts the ritual able to cause the god to appear, he is also able to ask questions of this god or compel him to act in a certain manner. Rituals of this type bring us to the domain of magic and divination. In the *Leyden Papyrus*, detailed instructions describe how to compel the gods to appear and how to command them (GRIFFITH & THOMPSON 1974).

## ORACLES

The word «oracle» was originally used to refer to a location at which a person manifested the gift of prophecy. Later, the term also came to be applied to the persons who served at these places. The rituals used at the sites of oracles are quite uniform throughout the world (LOEWE & BLACKER 1981). Through the aid of a psychedelic, the oracle (person) enters a prophetic trance in which he or she is able to divine the future. Perhaps the most well-known example of a ritual of this type is the oracle of Delphi. Here, the Pythia, the priestess of Apollo, inhaled henbane smoke in order to enter the necessary state of consciousness (RÄTSCH 1987). Ancient Mexico and Perú had similar oracles. In these areas, plants of the gods (ololiuqui, picietl, San Pedro cactus, coca, tobacco, villca) were ingested by a diviner/priest. Many pre-Columbian prophecies, like their counterparts from Delphi, became famous for their accuracy (RÄTSCH 1991a).

## SACRIFICES

Sacrifices and self-sacrifices are rituals in which the seeker after knowledge finds the path to the gods by sacrificing his own self. These sacrifices may in themselves elicit ecstatic states (PATTEE 1989). Among the ancient Maya, there

was a ritual of psychedelic self-sacrifice in which the searcher for knowledge withdrew into a cave or a dark temple vault and placed himself into an extraordinary state of consciousness by drinking a beverage of a number of active ingredients (balche, water lily, toads, thornapple). The self-sacrifice was performed by pushing a stingray spine through the penis (FURST 1976). This act was intended to approximate the menstruation of the moon goddess (RÄTSCH 1986). Through this act, a man attained knowledge and received an answer to a previously posed question.

Psychedelics (prickly poppy or datura) were also used to prepare the victims for the human sacrifices conducted by the Aztecs and Mayans. The Incas prepared the victims of their human sacrifices for their deaths by giving them chicha (maize beer) and coca (RÄTSCH 1990: 165). Another example of this type of ritual is described in the *Edda*: the self-sacrifice of Odin, conducted in conjunction with the discovery of the magical runes.

## HUNTING MAGIC

Rituals of this type may be either public or private. Here, an individual utilizes a psychedelic (e.g., ayahuasca, epená, borrachero, ololiuqui) to embark on a journey to the *lord of the animals* or the animal gods (REICHEL-DOLMATOFF 1975). Once arrived, he asks for information as to where his prey may be found or the luck which his tribe can expect during the forthcoming hunt. He may also ask the lords of the animals for forgiveness if someone has killed more animals than necessary.

## EROTICISM

An erotic ritual is conducted in order to recognize the god or goddess in oneself or one's partner and thereby obtain information about the nature of the world. The cult of Tantrism is the best-known example. In Tantrism, psychedelic aphrodisiacs (e.g., cannabis, thornapple, nux vomica, opium) are used to facilitate this spiritual process (MÜLLER-EBELING & RÄTSCH 1986). The Taoist alchemy and the occult sexual magic of Alister Crowley provide further examples of this type of ritual. The pederasty practiced by the ancient Greeks may have originally been associated with initiation into a mystery, and may thus also have been associated with a path to knowledge. The purpose of these erotic rituals is to break down the ego, an act which is not only healing, but is also associated with extreme pleasure. Freed of the ego, consciousness becomes much more open to messages from the gods (RÄTSCH 1990).

We may now consider the basic structure common to all these types of rituals. The purpose of a psychedelic ritual is to integrate the knowledge obtained therein with everyday life and the process of personal growth. The psychotherapeutic rituals of LSD therapy, psycholytic therapy, and group therapy with empathogens (ADAMSON 1985; GROF 1983; PINKSON 1989) may perhaps also be understood within this frame. Nevertheless, it must be noted that western therapists have a great deal of difficulty conducting suitable traditional rituals. Here again, it becomes apparent how much we may still learn from the cultures of the non-western world.

#### THE STRUCTURE OF RITUALS

Psychedelic rituals which contribute to a knowledge of space and time, eros and psyche, personality and the universe, share a common basic structure. This structure may be found in all epochs and cultures, and even appears to actually link together space and time. A psychedelic ritual is an initiation into a type of knowledge that is normally unobtainable, it is a transpersonal journey into mystical space, and is perhaps the most extreme of all the paths to knowledge. The initiate must possess a great deal of courage, for not all knowledge is pleasing and positive.

A person who wishes to participate in a psychedelic ritual must accept complete responsibility for him or herself. He cannot look for healing in the outer world, or in another person, but only within his own consciousness. Quickly, he will realize that it can only be found there. The realization that the grail glows only within one's own consciousness is almost banal, and yet it is still too unreal for most people. A person who is afraid of psychedelic plants is in reality afraid of himself and of the depths of his own self. Those who find the journey into the depths within too dangerous should refrain from utilizing magical herbs. For there appears to be a talent for taking psychedelics.

Not every person reacts to the same stimulus or the same catalyst in precisely the same manner. Not every molecule finds the proper receptor, but when a person hears the call of the plants of the gods and wishes to learn from these, he should make an effort to be inspired by the wisdom of other, more older cultures. A person who really desires to journey into mystical space should make an effort to acquire the appropriate travelling gear.

The most important part of a psychedelic ritual of knowledge is what happens afterwards. The experiences that have been attained, the visions which have been seen, and the knowledge that has been gained are useless if they do not aid in changing or developing the life of the initiate. Integrating psychedelic experience into everyday life, into daily consciousness, is of extreme importance. As Ralph Metzner once stated: «Only a vision which has been communicated has value. A vision should be reported to at least one other person». If a person has

#### THE BASIC STRUCTURE OF PSYCHEDELIC RITUALS OF KNOWLEDGE

PHASE	INTERNAL PROCESS	EXTERNAL ACTS
<i>Preparation</i>	Formulating the Question	Contemplation/ Reflection
	Purification	Meditation Fasting Ablutions/Vomiting/Enemas (*) Changing Clothes/ Painting Oneself/ Using Ritual Garments
<i>Implementation</i> (Execution)	Creating the Sacred Space	Burning Incense Listening to Music/ Drumming/Chanting Prayer/Invocations Offerings/Sacrifices Ingesting the Plants/Drugs
	Vision	Mantras/Magical Spells
	Knowledge	Concentrating upon Ritual Objects
<i>Integration</i>	Finding Answers Solving Problems	Communicating Visions (Story-telling, Writing, Singing, Painting)

(\*) Part of the preparatory purification may involve the administration of an enema. Either water or a decoction of a purgative plant, e.g., guayusa or jalape, may be used. The administration of ritual enemas was a practice especially prevalent in Native America. Occasionally, the primary drugs used in a ritual were themselves given ad rectum (FURST & COE 1989). As FURST & COE (1989: 129) have noted, «an intoxicant or hallucinogen injected rectally closely resembles an intravenous injection in the rapidity of its effects».

encountered his own limitations while under the influence of psychedelics, then it subsequently becomes possible to better deal with these limitations, and perhaps even to move beyond them. When a person has experienced the relativity and equal validity of things, it is easier to deal with the worries, fears, and threats of everyday life. If things of significance have been revealed in the visions, then it may be possible to use these afterwards for orientation.

The psychedelic experience should be consciously preserved as long as possible. For this purpose, it is often very useful to paint the visions or fix them in words. One should speak of the experience as often as possible, preferably with people who have had similar experiences. Another possibility is to visit the sites of the ancient cults and recall our ancestors and their rituals.

The key to understanding the role which rituals play in the traditional use of psychedelics is to realize that they provide an external structure which is understood and accepted by the participants. Because of their knowledge of this structure and their trust that their fellows will also adhere to the ritual rules, a participant in a psychedelic ritual of knowledge is able to temporarily surrender his self-control, thereby facilitating an experience of non-ordinary states of reality and the insights which they entail. In the field of psychology, frequent mention is made of the ego-dissolution which occurs in such states. From an anthropological point of view, it is more appropriate to speak of the dissolution of an individual's social personality.

The shift away from the patterns of thought and behavior normal to a society which is the object of the preparatory period, and the succeeding experience of aspects of reality not normally available, serve to make quite distinct both those areas in which the individual is in harmony with the world around him and those areas in which harmony is lacking. The journey across the bridge of the gods is a journey towards knowledge which will serve the individual in daily life. The psychedelic journey is not concerned solely with the individual's own self, as it so often is in the western context. Instead, it is a journey for the good of the group. The knowledge attained on such a journey suggests ways to attain greater harmony with the world, both the world of society, and the world of nature.

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Indirizzo dell'autore:  
 Christian Ratsch - Birckholtzweg 17 - D-2000 Hamburg 72