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Anthropology Book Forum

Open Access Book Reviews

The power of drugs: Implications from substance-use in ancient cultures

Review by Tony Blomqvist Mickelsson

Fitzpatrick, Scott. *Ancient Psychoactive Substances* (2018). University Press of Florida.

Ancient Psychoactive Substances is an endeavor in the history of what the contemporary society perceives and classifies as both illegal and legal mind-altering substances. Edited by Dr. Scott Fitzpatrick, this investigation and anthology draws from numerous sources in a cross-disciplinary manner, ranging from biomolecular analysis to interpretations of the substance-use itself and the social context it was consumed in. Not only does *Ancient Psychoactive Substances* give a fascinating historical account of the cultural settings of former substance-use, it also highlights the emergence of the research field in question. Specifically, central to the volume is the relationship between that of mind-altering substances and people. Ultimately, the practice of substance-use seems to transcend both cultures and time, with great implications for further research.

The volume consists of eleven chapters and an introduction, in which Fitzpatrick introduces categorizations of various substances. The three subsequent chapters investigate substance-use in Eurasia, the Eastern Mediterranean and the Western Hemisphere. The fourth- and fifth chapter is concerned with substance-use in ancient America. Chapter six to eleven is primarily concerned with substance-use in the Caribbean, amongst the ancient Maya people, Amazon and the Andes. The chapters provide an overview of various stimulants and plants in different cultural contexts, and a good portion of the chapters also provide a thorough description of the substances' respective biological and physical composition. This is accompanied by historic accounts, intertwined with different purposes and sometimes intrigues. For example, the authors touch upon Greek perceptions of "Scythians" (25) and their peculiar use of cannabis in funeral ceremonies, highlighting cultural differences and contrasts in relation to how substances are, perhaps, "supposed" to be utilized. Such examples shed light on more

cognitive processes on a group level and potential intergroup dynamics in relation to various substances.

Furthermore, the volume is concerned with how the effects of mind-altering substances may have impacted spiritual and religious practices in the past. The authors argue that Cannabis “...through the ages has allowed humans to cognitively recognize the god within and facilitate communication with their spirit world” (37). In a time dominated by spiritualism and shamanism, it is plausible that mind-altering substances must have had a profound effect on the connection between human and faith in god-like phenomena. One could argue that the elevated religious experiences due to mind-altering substances may very well have had imprints that still last to this day. Given the proposed historical impact of the substance in question, it is fair to say that further societal impact must be thoroughly discussed and examined, as cannabis specifically may be the most widely used illegal drug in our contemporary society (Richardson, 2010). By indicating such potential impact, *Ancient Psychoactive Substances* makes a significant contribution towards future research related to societal impacts due to substance-use and dramatically deepens the overall impact of the volume.

In chapter six, Quetta Kaye dwells deeper into the interpersonal relationships and power structures that may have existed in the context of substance-use. Such power structures may vary in forms and operate on both individual, group and community level. However, these levels are inherently intertwined. This may be characterized by an individual who possess the knowledge specific to the mind-altering effect or access to such material (or both) when operating in groups or communities. Quetta Kaye draws accurate parallels to that of shamans; shamans were plausibly held in high regards due to their medicinal- and spiritual knowledge connected to substances (169). Although acquiring a great deal of social status, the shamans were also social servants. They served the community as a whole with their practices. Thus, it becomes apparent that the power dynamic is, partially, a dynamic relationship. The shaman may be well respected and be in possession of individual power, but the group and other circumstances (e.g., environmental) will determine how dependent the group in question are upon the shaman and his or her practices. Within these power structures mentioned, lies the opportunity to form social cohesion and intimate in-group connections. Ultimately, this may be transformed into something that could be bestowed upon as political power. Once again,

the volume delicately highlights how psychoactive substances may have been utilized with greater purpose than one could initially imagine.

Other former and still important societal issues are also reflected in chapter six, where Daniel Seinfeld analyzes depictions of Mayans and intoxication rituals. In a very hierarchical fashion, females are being depicted as mere servants in intoxication rituals. In such rituals, the males are clearly asserting a dominant position, to say the least, and seems to have exclusive access to any god-like experience the ritual may provide. Seinfeld discusses these findings in the light of contemporary television commercial, where one can behold males usually being served beer by attractive women (191). As the author argues, the gender identities in the context of alcohol, in this instance, are still very much present in today's society.

Ancient Psychoactive Substances provides a rich overview of the matter in question, in what seems to be a successful holistic approach. One has the opportunity to either dive deep into more biological matters and domains which pertain to archaeologists, but also to more social matters that is interesting to any social scientist. The connection between former impact and current status of certain substances in our society is particularly intriguing; the volume makes a strong case for making historical inquiries when investigating contemporary substance-use. The only flaw one can come to think of is that the majority of the book is concerned with American populations. To summarize this review, the current volume is a fascinating empirical tale of substance-using ancient cultures which instantly increases the curiosity of the reader. Moreover, these captivating historical narratives are accompanied by more hard data on the actual substance in question. Thus, this fusion makes the book more readily available and ultimately interesting to a broader audience. Finally, in the eyes of a social scientist, the volume is surprisingly more concerned with societal issues and how substances were utilized in interpersonal relationships than one would expect. A range of such issues are discussed in the light of substance-use, including religious practices, power structures and gender.

Tony Blomqvist Mickelsson is a PhD student in Social Work at Södertörn University. His dissertation revolves around immigration and the use of sport as a vehicle for social change in the Baltic Sea region. However, he has a wide array of scholarly interests. Coming from a MA in forensic psychology and a BA in criminology, deviant behavior and drug-use has been of great interest. Additionally, working as a research assistant in a psychophysiological lab early sparked interest in neurological processes.

Works cited:

Fitzpatrick, S. 2018. Ancient Psychoactive Substances. *University Press of Florida*.

Richardson, T. H. 2010. Cannabis Use and Mental Health: A Review of Recent Epidemiological Research. *International Journal of Pharmacology* 6: 796–807.



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