Miserable Miracles:

PSYCHEDELIC DRUGS AND MODERNISM

BY DANIEL PINCHBECK

1. My initiation began at dusk. The men of the Bwiti met me in front of the temple. They had changed from their everyday jeans and T-shirts into tribal dress. They were an impressive sight. Limbs and torsos bare, they wore animal skins and loincloths, with armbands and necklaces of shells and feathers. Their black skin was painted with patterns of white stripes and dots.

We walked in single file, away from the village, following a path through the darkening jungle, to the banks of a small stream. Among the Bwiti, I felt foreign, pale and scared. Some of the men held torches, while others played drums and rattles and horns in a weird, almost humorous march. In the flickering flames, the white painted patterns glowed like neon on their bodies.

I had traveled 6,000 miles for this ritual—my psychedelic bar mitzvah, my shamanic coming-out party.

The self-proclaimed "king of the Bwiti," Tsanga Jean Moutumba,[1] the tribal shaman, told me to undress completely and step into the middle of the stream. As I shivered in the cold water, the young man assigned to be my "Bwiti father" poured a soapy liquid over me—a protective spirit-medicine—and then smeared a rough red paste across my face and torso. The Bwiti sang together while I put on the initiate's outfit—straps of tanned animal skins and shells looping across my chest and upper arms, a short red tunic, and a red feather twirled in my hair.

It was time to begin eating the *iboga*.[2]

2.

The last centuries of capitalism, industrial progress and rationalism are mirrored by an alternative cultural history of frantic visions, symbolic excursions and narcotic escapes. Modernist artists searched for antidotes to the suffocating rationalism of the West. They looked to archaic rituals and so-called primitive cultures for liberation and for new formal languages. The exploration of drug-induced visionary states was one extreme limit, one essential element, of the Modernist quest.

In the 19th century, Romantics and Decadents such as Coleridge and Baudelaire explored the interior dreamscapes of opium, hashish and absinthe. The poet Rimbaud called for "a systematic derangement of the senses," and in the 1920s the Surrealists, following his lead, found inspiration in extremes of psychic disorder and excess.

Walter Benjamin, the great critic of Surrealism and Modernism, used hashish and theorized about the narcotic trance with his typical brilliance. Writing on the Surrealists, he noted: "In the world's structure, dream loosens individuality like a bad tooth. This loosening of the self by intoxication is, at

[1] I kept trying to learn what Moutumba's status as "Le Roi du Gabon Bwiti" meant. I received different answers. Our translator, Alain Dukaga, an English-speaking Gabonese, told me: "Moutumba is like Jesus to us. Most of the people now are lacking roots, they got tied to the Christian ways and forgot their culture. Moutumba is helping to bring back our culture." When relations soured between us and our shaman, he reversed himself: Moutumba is "not the king of anything. He just calls himself that."

[2] *Tabernanthe iboga* is an ordinary-looking shrub found in a small area of West Africa. The bush produces simple yellow blossoms and edible orange-colored citrus fruit that is tasteless and oddly sticky. Under optimum conditions, iboga can grow into a tree rising as much as forty feet. The root bark of the plant—which is scraped off, ground into powder and swallowed—contains one of the world's most powerful, long-lasting and mysterious psychedelic agents.

PSYCHEDELICS OPENED VAST DOMAINS OF AWARENESS, SPARKED IDEAS. BUT THE EXPERIENCE WAS ALSO ONE OF ABJECTION, ANXIETY AND HELPLESSNESS.

the same time, precisely the fruitful, living experience that allowed these people to step outside the domain of intoxication." For Benjamin, drug-altered states allowed thinkers to escape, temporarily, from the overwhelming, and intoxicating, dreamworld of capitalism.

While narcotics stimulate subterranean landscapes of the imagination, psychedelics such as peyote, ayahuasca and psilocybin cause more extreme forms of rupture and rapture. The rediscovery of psychedelic drugs in the 20th century led to a "return of the repressed" in Western culture. They opened the gates to lost domains of the ecstatic, visionary and sacred, accessing those distant regions of the mind suppressed by modern civilization. It is impossible to say to what extent the psychedelic journey was essential to the radical, Dionysian upsurge of the 1960s. It is a mark of the disruptive power of psychedelics that their arrival on the scene was followed quickly by severe societal repression.[3] Since then, different mood-altering chemicals—Prozac and Ritalin, for example—have been embraced by the mainstream.

Modernist culture can be seen as a succession of encounters with the deviant and disgraced, with everything that was refused, tossed aside, made alien by the West. The resurgence of interest in the most sacred tribal medicines, which began with a few dedicated and often desperate seekers, opened a new phase of the Modernist exploration of cultural otherness: an attempt to make direct contact with the visionary knowledge of "primitive" societies.

The writers of the 20th century who first took the psychedelic voyage out—Antonin Artaud, Henri Michaux, Aldous Huxley and William Burroughs among them—found that the tribal sacraments, off-limits and little-known in the West for many centuries, had a split identity. On the one hand, the substances opened vast domains of perceptual awareness, sparked new ideas and unleashed visions that seemed to unfold from the Jungian collective unconscious, or from the mind of a supernatural trickster. But the experience was also one of abjection and anxiety and helplessness. The French poet Henri Michaux, for example, described tripping on mescaline as a "miserable miracle," a collapse into a realm where logic and language fell apart, where paranoia became palpable, where he confronted a terrifying "otherness" that threatened the sanctity of the self.

It was my own desire to approach that "otherness" that led me to Gabon in West Africa, where an archaic tribal culture still exists in full force—preserved like some amazing hothouse specimen—a culture based on communion with an ancient psychedelic plant.

3.

The king raised up the plantain with two hands. My Bwiti father carried this sacrament to me gingerly while the others watched. I looked at the fruit, which had been split open and filled with the drug's whitish powder. The Bwiti men on the hillside sang and drummed a dirge-like melody. By casting off my clothes and putting on the red robe of the initiate, I had symbolically died. After eating the iboga powder, I would be reborn.

For many months afterwards, whenever I thought of the taste, I started to shudder. The flavor was incredibly vile, like sawdust laced with battery acid. It was like trying to swallow a corrosive poison; my tongue, throat and mind wanted to rebel against the effort. After I finished the dry fruit, I was fed a few more spoonfuls of the drug mixed with honey. The shaman nodded encouragingly. I fought to keep the stuff down.

We returned to the village. My legs had turned rubbery and I felt queasy. In the main courtyard, a few of the men sat around me, playing

[3] Today, psychedelics are subject to two forms of cultural repression: They are simultaneously demonized and trivialized. Paul Devereaux wrote in his book "The Long Strange Trip": "I sometimes wonder if our culture, acting in the manner of a single organism—in the way a crowd of people or a classroom of students sometimes can—somehow senses a deep threat to its own philosophical foundations residing in the psychedelic experience. This might help account for the otherwise irrational hatred and repression of the use of hallucinogens, and the smirking dismissal of the psychedelic experience as a trivial one by so many of our intellectuals."

drums. One of them strummed the *mícongo*, a one-stringed mouth harp resembling a bow, which has the eerie, almost humorous tonality of a mocking voice. I had been told that the *mícongo* channels the voices of the Bwiti's ancestors. They put a bundle of leaves in my right hand and a whisk of dry thistles in my left and told me to keep shaking both in time to the music.

They fed me more iboga and brought me into the torch-lit temple. I was placed alone at the center, facing a mirror surrounded by fern leaves and carved figurines. The king and the tribal elders sat to my left, and the rest of the tribe on my right, perhaps thirty people in all.

My guide, Dan Lieberman, an ethnobotanist from South Africa, snapped pictures. Dan's other customer for this experiential journey was a psychoanalyst from New York[4]. She lay along a wall of the temple surrounded supportively by Bwiti women as she recounted her visions. "There's Buddha," she said, pointing at the ceiling. She turned around. "And I see my dead grandma over there." She waved at the wall. "Hello, grandma."

The atmosphere was tense. The king had decreed I would have "wonderful visions," and I began to realize that not satisfying him was not an option.

A long time seemed to pass, and nothing happened.

Finally, out of the corner of my eye, I saw my first vision: A large wooden statue, a dark and faceless figure made from rough logs, walked across the room and sat on the bench, watching me. Then a tiny screen opened up in the scratched and pockmarked surface of the mirror I was facing. On that screen I saw images from my life in New York—the window of my apartment, street scenes. The images were ghost impressions in shades of gray, like the images from an old black-and-white film. They were clearly distinct, but when I tried to look at them too directly, they wavered and disappeared.

[4] The analyst was a nice woman. However, she almost ruined the tribal experience for me. When she found out where I was from, she said: "You're a New Yorker also? What a surprise! I'm a psychoanalyst in the West Village. Maybe you know my friend who works for *The New York Times*? Or my sister, the novelist?"

I nodded at the names, trying to recover from the shock of unwanted familiarity. I had dreamt of some pristine experience of the exotic that I read about in the novels of Joseph Conrad or Paul Bowles. Instead, I ended up sharing my Bwiti adventure with a woman I might have avoided at a Manhattan cocktail party.

4.

My curiosity about psychedelics blossomed at a time when I was losing interest in myself and in contemporary reality. My life in New York City seemed fragmented and shallow, cut off from deeper truth. Cut off, above all, from any spiritual connection or metaphysical path.

I did not know how to deal with my own inchoate yearnings.

I belong to a generation alienated from its own experience. We have forfeited our essence to digital abstractions and virtual distractions. The self-knowledge achieved through real, physical discovery or through visionary states now seems alien, even repellent, compared to the disembodied gaze, the remote-control critical mode forced on us by the culture. The automatic self-removal and passive irony that is the style of the age keeps the dangerous risks and glamorous rewards of the quest for experience and meaning at a safe distance.

But here is the problem, as I came to see it: When, after whatever series of events or runs of bad luck, you end up deeply in the shit, the only knowledge you can have faith in, the only experience you can trust, is your own.

I was becoming increasingly desperate.[5] I felt, at times, oddly depersonalized, as if I were an entomologist assigned to study a doomed insect species made up only of myself. My detachment concealed a core of nihilism and despair.

Friends of mine snorted heroin and cocaine, smoked pot, popped Quaaludes, drank oceans of booze. I had lost my drive towards such hedonism.

I needed to shock myself in some violent fashion.

This story of my inquiry into psychedelics is also the story of how I reconnected with aspects of my own self. It is the story of how I shirked

[5] There are various reasons why I, particularly, am infested with this spiritual malaise. One reason is my connection, through my mother, to the simultaneously maligned and revered writers of the Beat Generation, who chased mystical experience across the globe. A second reason is the imponderable nature of my last name, Pinchbeck, a word for a type of false gold. This alloy was invented by Christopher Pinchbeck, an alchemist ancestor, in the 18th century. Later, the word came to mean anything false or spurious—-as in, "a pinchbeck age of literature." Carrying this spurious name around gives me a feeling of distance from the hard actualities of existence.

despair and found strange new possibilities. And it is the story of how I went to West Africa and joined a tribal sect by eating their psychedelic sacrament, inducing an altered state lasting more than thirty hours.

5.

Over the last decades, ibogaine has developed a cult following in the United States and in Europe. Among an underground of anarchists, Yippies and former junkies, it is promoted as a one-shot cure for addiction to heroin, cocaine and other drugs. These claims are being investigated seriously: In America, scientists at Harvard, NYU, the University of Florida and elsewhere are studying the ibogaine molecule, seeking to unlock its incredibly complex mechanisms.[6] Because of the flurry of interest in the drug, a music magazine agreed to fund my trip to Africa.

The trip was not without its dangers—malaria being one of them, the intense tropical heat another.[7] It was in the jungles of Gabon that the deadly ebola[8] virus first appeared. Then there were the hazards of trying a little-known, long-acting hallucinogen far from any hospital. After iboga is in your system for a while, it must be vomited out—producing what one study euphemistically described as "tremendous cleansings." In rare cases, Bwiti initiates have overdosed and died during the ritual.

"The Bwiti believe that before the initiation, the neophyte is nothing," my guide told me on my first morning in Gabon, as we took a cab through Libreville, the nation's capital. "Through the ceremony, you become something."

"What do you become?" I asked.

"You become a *baanzi*, one who knows the other world, because you have seen it with your own eyes."

"How do the Bwiti think about iboga?" I asked

[6] One current scientific effort, predictably, aims to separate the drug's anti-addictive properties from its psychedelic effects. Former addicts who have taken the drug doubt that this is possible.

[7] Luckily, my trip took place in the equatorial winter, when it was actually cool at night. In fact, during my initiation, I lay for many hours on the floor of the temple, shivering and freezing, since the Bwiti would not let me have a blanket.

[8] The verbal near-homology of "ebola" and "iboga" continues to bother me.

"The Bwiti believe that iboga is a super-conscious spiritual entity that guides mankind."

I had found the guide on the Internet; he offered to bring Westerners to a shaman's tribal village for a fee. "I have spent time in the rainforests of Africa east and west, Madagascar and the Amazon working with shamans, *brujos*, witch doctors, healers," Lieberman wrote to me in an e-mail beforehand. "Iboga, I feel to be the one plant that needs to be introduced to the world, and urgently."

In person, the botanist was thin and pallid, dressed in Teva sandals and safari clothes, and younger than I imagined. He said his ghost-white complexion was due to a nearly fatal bout of cerebral malaria. "I caught it during a Bwiti ceremony a year ago," he told me. "It took me months to recover." This was worrisome. He also told me that, on iboga, he had been shown the date of his own death. From the somber way he said this I suspected it wasn't so far away.

Libreville was a hot and stagnant city. Sunlight reflected off gleaming glass corporate towers, the headquarters of oil companies. Because of its oil deposits, Gabon is richer and more secure than other countries in the region. Iboga is another natural resource, but one that has yet to be exploited by the Gabonese.

"Why would the Bwiti allow me to join their sect?" I asked my guide.

"Bwiti is like Buddhism," he replied.[9] "Anyone can join. The word 'Bwiti' simply means the experience of iboga, which is the essence of love."

6.

Antonin Artaud traveled to Mexico in 1936 to participate in the peyote rituals of the Tarahumara Indians, a remote mountain tribe living on barren peaks a few days' journey from Mexico City. The tormented poet and dramatist was

[9] While Lieberman simply equates Bwiti with Buddhism, to most observers, it remains a mystery religion. James Fernandez, an anthropologist who studied the sect at length, ended his book, "Bwiti: An Ethnography of the Religious Imagination in Africa," inconclusively: "In the end, any attempt to demonstrate the coherence of the Bwiti cosmos founders upon the paradoxes with which it plays." For Fernandez, the Bwiti religion worked by "indirection and suggestion and other kinds of puzzlements," leaving "many loose ends and inconsistencies."

driven to recover "that sense of the sacred which European consciousness has lost." "The Peyote Dance," Artaud's text on his voyage, worked and reworked over many years, is a fractured narrative, made up of stops and starts, convulsive revelations and tormented cries.

"Incredible as it may seem, the Tarahumara Indians live as if they were already dead," he wrote. "They do not see reality and they draw magical powers from the contempt they have for civilization." The Indians seemed to live in a state of philosophical purity, seeking answers to the deepest spiritual questions. They pursued this knowledge in a direct, visceral way, through the visions of peyote.

Eventually, the Tarahumara shamans allowed Artaud to join their all-night peyote ceremony. He experienced visions and saw mystical signs—"these dangerous disassociations it seems Peyote provokes, and which I had for years sought by other means."

Artaud's fractured text is shot through with Christian imagery of crucifixion and redemption, the pressure of his madness and his yearning to re-enchant the world. "For there is in consciousness a Magic with which one can go beyond things. And Peyote tells us where this Magic is, and after what strange concretions . . . the Fantastic can emerge and can once again scatter in our consciousness its phosphorescence and its haze."

The peyote visions were, in the end, revelatory, almost impossible to convey. He saw the letters of an ancient alphabet rising from his spleen or liver, then the fiery letters "J" and "E" burning at the bottom of an immense void. "Peyote leads the self back to its true sources," he wrote. "Once one has experienced a visionary state of this kind, one can no longer confuse the lie with the truth. One has seen where one comes from and who one is, and one no longer doubts what one is." Artaud spent 12 years before his death, much of it in mental hospitals, rewriting and annotating the text of his revelations among the Tarahumara.

7.

The king's belligerence and greed and tyrannical theatricality were not evident upon first meeting him.

At his house in Libreville, as we discussed arrangements for the trip, the king seemed gruff but basically friendly. With his purple robe, ample stomach, bushy gray beard, and necklace of lion's teeth, he had the presence of a 1960s avant-garde jazz musician. We met members of his huge family—we were told he had eight wives and 14 children. The tribe packed our bags into a jeep, and the king himself drove us down Gabon's single highway, to the king's village, 40 kilometers outside of Lambourene.

The village consisted of a complex of simple one-story buildings in a jungle clearing where children, hens and roosters meandered about. One roofless structure decorated with palm fronds, the "Pygmy House," honored the region's natives for discovering "*le bois sacré*"—"the sacred wood," another name for iboga. The Pygmies still live in small bands in Gabon's interior jungles, and it is theoretically possible to have a Pygmy initiation.

The night before the ceremony, the analyst, the guide, the king and I slept in his temple, along with various members of the tribe. When we awoke, the king gave us what the Bwiti call *la liste,* a long, traditional roster of things neophytes buy for the ritual, including a mirror, a tin bucket, a red parrot's feather, yards of fabric, a machete and supplies for the next day's feast for the tribe. The analyst, the guide and I spent the morning driving around the market stalls of Lambourene with a few of the king's sons, whose gravity as they assisted us made me aware of the serious nature of the ceremony.

Back at the village, the king called us into the temple. "It was good you stayed here last night," he said, smiling. "Last night, I dreamt that *le journaliste*"—he pointed at me—"will have many wonderful visions. Now you must give us the rest of the money."[10]

This was a surprise. We had already paid the agreed-upon $600 for the ceremony, double the fee for the average Gabonese. We reminded him of this, but the king started to shout. "You want to cheat me?" he screamed. He demanded another $600 from each of us. The guide tried to bargain with him. The argument raged on for hours. The young men of the tribe stared at us

[10] I have since learned, and accepted, that shamanism is always a mercantile pursuit.

WE REMINDED HIM THAT WE HAD ALREADY PAID, BUT THE KING STARTED TO SHOUT. "YOU WANT TO CHEAT ME?" HE SCREAMED.

stonily, as if they were shocked we would challenge the king's authority.

Although the guide assured us the Bwiti were pacifist, the situation did not feel safe. During one conference with the king and his brother, a hunting rifle was displayed on the table before them.

Finally, it was announced that the initiation would proceed even though we had cheated them. However, at the end of the ritual, the king would not give us the special oil bestowing a deeper understanding of our visions through the year. "He himself will not walk with you into the forest and explain to you the myth of the Bwiti," our guide translated. From that point, Moutumba's tribe seemed to regard us with contempt. Bwiti no longer suggested quite the "essence of love" our guide had described.

"If you see a window you must try to go through it," the king instructed me, "and if you meet somebody there you must try to talk to them. Perhaps they have a message for you, some information."

The Bwiti insisted I should relate my visions out loud. I was not ready for that. I had expected whatever I saw to be my own concern. But the Bwiti didn't sympathize with my ideas of privacy. "Everything you see must be shared," the king urged. "You might have a message for the tribe." In my stoned state I was tongue-tied, and I sensed the Bwiti's rigid disapproval of my silence.

Other hallucinations passed before my eyes—burning skulls and goblin faces, the figures of women in black dresses stretching out long white arms toward me from the edges of my vision. But when I tried to tell them, they disappeared.

"I think they are going to keep feeding iboga to you until you start talking," my guide whispered to me nervously.

Meanwhile, the drug was making me sick. I fought against the pulses and waves of nausea. I wanted to reach the deepest visionary state, but I was also scared of the drug. If iboga was indeed a "super-conscious spiritual entity," I wasn't sure whether this entity liked or hated me. Perhaps it wanted to kill me. I was an outsider, a stranger to its meanings.

They brought me outside, where I stood under the cool stars. I was drenched in sweat. My head seemed like a balloon, blown up several times its normal size. I wondered if I was going to die. I retched and vomited green slime into my pail.

8.

"I was on all fours convulsed with spasms of nausea," William Burroughs wrote to Allen Ginsberg, describing a yagé [the sacred hallucinogenic drink of Indian tribes in the Amazon basin] session. "I could hear retching and groaning as if I was someone else. I was lying by a rock. Hours must have passed."

The year was 1953. Burroughs went down to Colombia searching for yagé. Yagé, also known as ayahuasca, is administered by shamans or sorcerers (*curanderos* or *brujos*), and is one of the most ancient and powerful of all psychedelics. At that time, the drug was virtually unknown in the West. The 39-year-old Burroughs heard rumors of it as "the ultimate kick." Burroughs was desperate. An aging trust-fund brat, heroin-addicted and homosexual, Burroughs had killed his wife several years earlier, drunkenly shooting her through the head at their home in Mexico City. It was a party trick gone wrong—but Burroughs knew it was more than that. He felt that he was possessed by evil spirits, that he was damned. He went in search of yagé in Bogotá, hoping that the tribal visions could redeem or exorcise him somehow, and that the drug could cure him of junk.

Taking the drug with *brujos* in the Amazon jungle, Burroughs did receive visions—not visions of light and life but of dark mergings and dissolutions. "Larval beings passed before my eyes in a blue haze, each one giving an obscene, mocking squawk (I later identified this squawking as the croaking of frogs)," he wrote to Ginsberg after an early session in which he vomited six times.

"Yagé is space-time travel," he wrote from Peru, after many misadventures and traumatic trips. "The room seems to shake and vibrate with motion. The blood and substance of many races—Negro, Polynesian, Mountain Mongol, Desert Nomad, Polyglot Near East, Indian, new races as yet unconceived and unborn, combinations not yet realized—passes through your body." The drink gave Burroughs entry to the "Composite City where all human potentials are spread out in a vast silent market. . . . The city is visited by epidemics of violence and the untended dead are eaten by vultures in the street." Memory of his yagé illuminations became the atmosphere that permeates "Naked Lunch" and his other novels with their dissolutions of identity, murky cities of festering plagues and montage-like breaks.

The infinite, murmuring vista of urban sleaze, cheap kicks and blank death that Burroughs discovered was probably not the vision he wanted, but it was a vision he could use.

9.

When I was no longer sick, the Bwiti took me back inside the temple. They brought me to lie on a mat on the hard-packed earth. The tribesmen drummed and sang, the sound pounding against the walls of my skull. I felt an incredible sense of failure as I scorned my own foolishness: Who was I to try to enter the African spirit world?

Closing my eyes, I saw brightly colored patterns. Spiraling plant-like forms swirled with the music. I fell into a trance, floating with the Bwiti songs. Aspects of my past life flared up in my mind. I reviewed elements of my early life—my parents' separation, my mother's loneliness, my own unhappiness. I returned to the secret, baroque sources of childhood nightmare and fantasy: the space under the bed, the nest of darkness inside the closet. I saw myself clearly as the anthropological product of all the forces that had acted upon me.

Henry James once described human consciousness as "a helpless jelly poured into a mold." Iboga compelled me to perceive the exact shape of that outline. It was a feeling that mingled wonder, sadness and freedom. The trip became a cinematic cyclone, whirling images and ideas at me at high speed. A series of unknown houses appeared, ghostly visions of a suburban landscape I had never visited before, and I drifted down into them. Images of past girlfriends appeared and dispersed like fog. I saw the sign of the now-defunct Manhattan restaurant, Teacher's Too, where I met my first girlfriend. The letters of this sign spun around in space and reassembled, rebus-like, to spell the phrase, "Touchers Teach Too," which seemed to contain a message about my own future relationships. There was a hint of reconciliation in the phrase, but what did it mean?

Sometimes the percussive music became deafening in the low-ceilinged temple. At other times the Bwiti's songs seemed awesome in their beauty—the most beautiful melodies I had ever heard. In my altered state, I understood the tribe's deep relationship with this plant that showed them things. I felt how complete their culture was in itself—so complete that no outsider could disturb it.

Late at night, the Bwiti made us rise and dance with them.[11] The men tried to teach me the basic steps, which were difficult for me to follow in my state of stoned self-consciousness. Then we sat down to watch as each man in the tribe danced around the temple, whirling a torch, scattering shadows across the walls like living forms.

"After you take iboga, you will know what Bwiti is," Moutumba had told me the day before the ritual. I was still trying to understand it. I saw that taking iboga was a way of activating a symbiotic psychic link between plant and human.[12] The symbiosis left me with an intuitive sense of some other intelligence existing in a realm outside of our own. At dawn, the Bwiti led us outside to watch the sunrise. Pink light filtered over the jungle, across the dusty disorder of the village. They sang, and we sang with them.

[11] What the guide had failed to convey beforehand was the whole college-frat hazing aspect of the Bwiti initiation. You were supposed to suffer throughout the long night, lying uncovered, while the king and the Bwiti heaped ridicule upon you, in French and Bantu. Then, at the end, they would turn around and shower love and acceptance upon you. With the king, unfortunately, we never made it to Phase Two.

[12] The belief that plants have spirit and consciousness is common to native groups. For example, Levi-Strauss notes, "When a medicine man of eastern Canada gathers roots or leaves, he is careful to propitiate the soul of each plant by placing a tiny offering at its base." ("The Savage Mind")

10.

While Artaud and Michaux could only disclose their psychedelic encounters in fractured prose, Aldous Huxley presented his famous account of his 1953 mescaline trip in the cogent, even jaunty style of a boy's adventure story. In the introduction, Huxley announces his intent to join "the sleuths—biochemists, psychiatrists, psychologists"—on the trail of mescaline.

Throughout "The Doors of Perception," Huxley's manner remains self-assured, his style clear. Even when he approaches the prospect of collapsing into incoherence, he does it in cool prose. Looking at a chair and seeing an intensity of actuality comparable to the Christian Last Judgment, he notes: "It was inexpressibly wonderful, wonderful to the point, almost, of being terrifying. And suddenly I had an inkling of what it must feel like to be mad. Schizophrenia has its heavens as well as its hells and purgatories." He analyzes the fear "of being overwhelmed, of disintegrating under a pressure of reality greater than a mind, accustomed to living most of the time in a cozy world of symbols, could possibly bear." Here, Huxley admits his own limits. He is not constitutionally capable of straying far beyond his "cozy world of symbols."

While other writers were hermetic in their accounts, Huxley's book was propaganda, advocating the mystical experience as lifestyle choice. In this way, he paved the way for Timothy Leary and the '60s debasement of the subject into pop-culture cliché. Huxley was the first to connect psychedelics with Eastern mysticism, particularly the "Tibetan Book of the Dead," a conceptual scheme that was cannibalized by Leary and became wildly popular during the psychedelia-glutted '60s. Huxley ignored the earth-bound, tribal world from which the drugs originated in favor of Eastern esoterica, sidestepping the drug's darker, more chaotic dimensions.

The possibility of designer mind-drugs had long fascinated him. "If I were a millionaire, I should endow a band of research workers to look for a new intoxicant," he wrote in 1931. Huxley invented Soma, a narco-hallucinogen, in "Brave New World." Soma was far from a benign intoxicant. It was a tool of "repressive tolerance," keeping the citizens of Huxley's designer dystopia doped and docile.

Decades later, he looked toward the eventual development of psychoactive drugs similar to Prozac: Probably, he wrote, these "will both enslave and make free, heal and at the same time destroy." Huxley was fascinated by mind drugs as potential agents of personal liberation and social control—a toggle switch in his thinking flips back and forth between the two perspectives. On his deathbed, his wife injected him with a sizable dose of liquid LSD, a trip that perhaps evaded even his capacity for rational analysis.

11.

We were still woozy as the ritual ended, but the king started shouting again. "Now you have been initiated, you give me presents of money!" he screamed. We decided to escape and check into a hotel. This required another long and tense negotiation.

"*J'ai eu des visions de ruine terrible,*" the king shouted. Because I had not seen and spoken all my visions, the king explained, we would be in mortal danger if we did not stay another night. As the botanist insisted we were leaving anyway, the king tried to make a fast bargain. Introducing the psychoanalyst to the father of a nine-year-old girl, he suggested that instead of paying more, she should take the man's daughter away and raise her in America.[13]

We convinced one of the king's sons to drive us to the Ogobue Palace, a placid hotel overlooking the river. At the hotel, I discovered that the iboga trip was continuing. I was wide awake and without hunger, despite the fact that I had not slept or eaten in more than 30 hours. Lying in bed, I watched fleeting phantasms drift across cracks in the white wall. Strange men in funny hats and coats marched away, melting into the plaster, trailed by faint music. I realized these were "ancestor shades," ghost-impressions of my forefathers,

[13] This was crude psychology on the part of the king: While tripping, the analyst had talked about her regret in never having a child—-not imagining she would be given an immediate chance to rectify the situation.

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the types of visions that the iboga trance often produced, according to accounts I had read. So faint, so quickly, they melted away.

12.

Writing about my time in Gabon, I find myself torn between a syntactical logic—a logic that hides meaning and seems to carry it further away as I press towards it—and a dissolution of syntax that equally fails to convey not only the particulars of the experience but its essence. It is like swimming towards a shore that recedes with each stroke.

What we expect from good writing is a kind of constancy, a convergence of style and content that creates at least a temporary illusion of a fixed meaning, a graspable reality. The psychedelic experience breaks that fixity, or at least opens it to question. Perhaps some subjects can only be approached in glancing ways, in offhand comments, in paradoxes. The entire subject of psychedelia might be nothing more than a baroque marginalia, an irrational scrawling beyond the edges of the "meaningful" cultural text. Or perhaps it is a subject that requires careful attention.

The botanist Terrence McKenna believed that psychedelics are illegal "because there is something about them that casts doubts on the validity of reality." This doubt threatens the power of any social order. "Novelty is unguarded because its domain is everywhere," McKenna writes. "The power of the Other is humbling and magnificent, but because it cannot be bent into power in this world, priestcraft turns away from it."

In his book "Shamanism, Colonialism, and the Wild Man," the anthropologist Michael Taussig studied ayahuasca shamanism in Colombia, where ancient rituals have taken on new meanings in the wake of the cruel excesses of colonialism. Taussig's sorcerers exorcise terror through laughter and improvisation, "building and rebuilding neocolonial healing rituals wherein fate is wrested from the hands of God and transcribed into a domain of chance and

perhapsness." Anthropologists once believed that all religious rituals work to order and unify society. Taussig found the opposite with yagé: The ceremonies open up a transcendent space for chaos.

Taussig quotes Roland Barthes on the idea of a "third" or "obtuse meaning," outside of what can be expressed in language or defined by cultural analysis:

> . . . the obtuse meaning appears to extend outside culture, knowledge, information; analytically it has something derisory about it; opening out into the infinity of language, it can come through as limited in the eyes of analytic reason; it belongs to the family of pun, buffoonery, useless expenditure. Indifferent to moral or aesthetic categories (the trivial, the futile, the false, the pastiche), it is on the side of the carnival. (Barthes, "Image, Music, Text")

The shaman preserves a place for a knowledge that can heal because it is outside any system. The meanings that psychedelics offer belong to this ephemeral category of "obtuse meaning," of "thrown-away knowledge." Yagé visions open up constellations of potential meanings, of "chance and perhapsness."

For Taussig and McKenna, the shaman is the traditional figure who presides over this rupture in meaning, who seals it with his laughter and gestures, with his stories and his songs. He is the holy fool, the trickster and shape-shifter. Where has he gone in our own secular, mass-market culture? Either he is cut off from our cultural experience entirely or he has been transformed into something unrecognizable.

13.

We did not see the king again. After a night's rest, Lieberman and I searched Lambourene for other Bwiti Ngongo. Our guide was eager to buy iboga seeds

and powder to bring to South Africa. Off the main streets, the town's back alleys formed mazes of little houses and shacks in the woods, and each separate maze seemed its own community. Many of these communities had their own Bwiti temple, built from wooden boards and palm fronds, rudimentary compared to the king's concrete sanctuary.

In one of these local shrines we found Papa Simone, a young, bearded shaman with a thoughtful, gentle manner. I described my visions, scant though they were, to Papa Simone, and he interpreted them for me. The wooden statue, he said, was the spirit of *le bois sacré* itself, "which comes out and engages you in conversation." The pictures of my apartment and the city streets were a telepathic check-in, showing me that everything was calm at home. The beckoning female figures, he said, indicated what paths to take. I was sorry I hadn't known better how to follow them.

Papa Simone organized another all-night ceremony for us with his Bwiti village, a closing ritual to give us the oil that the king had withheld. During that night of dancing, drumming and singing, I saw what Lieberman had described as "the essence of love" in the community around Papa Simone. At the end of the night, each of the Bwiti in turn embraced the analyst, then me, and danced us around the temple fire, as violently and quickly as possible. The embraces told us—more directly than words could—that despite our alien language, culture and skin, we were accepted by them.

The second ceremony also required eating iboga. Papa Simone's tribe included a large, laughing man wearing a red loincloth, his sleek, black body daubed with white paint. One of the elders of the tribe, he ate iboga throughout the ceremony. He kept pointing at the bowl of shavings, and then at his own eyes, and then at me, trying to convince me to eat more of the horrible root so I would see things.

Towards morning, he announced that he was having a vision. He said he saw the spirit of my dead grandmother, hovering over me where I sat by the yellow flames of the bonfire. "You had a very close relationship with your grandmother," he told me. "She loved you very much, but now she is dead, and she doesn't want to let you go. Her spirit is hanging over you, and she is stopping you from seeing visions and from visiting the other world."[14]

The tribesman's vision shocked me. This grandmother—my mother's mother—was the only grandparent I had known—the others died before I was born. If the tribesman was guessing, he had only a one-in-four chance of getting that right. And I did have a close relationship with my grandmother. She often took care of me when I was young. As I got older, I found her a repressive and gloomy presence.[15] It was not difficult to imagine my grandma as a possessive spirit, lingering above me. After I returned to New York, the tribesman's vision seemed an uncanny example of what Shakespeare called a "marvelous intuition."

14.

Walter Benjamin, writing in the 1930s, saw the drug-intoxicated state as an emblem of thought: "The most passionate examination of the hashish trance will not teach us half as much about thinking (which is eminently narcotic), as the profane illumination of thinking about the hashish trance," he wrote. "The reader, the thinker, the flaneur, are types of illuminati just as much as the opium eater, the dreamer, the ecstatic. . . . Not to mention that most terrible drug—ourselves—which we take in solitude."

I am interested in examining the psychedelic experience as a "profane illumination," an extreme that underlies thought, that shapes our cultural and human possibilities whether we know it or not.

Mainstream culture continues to explore the repressed and ridiculed psychedelic experience in the form of cinematic parable. Recent movies such

[14] I am probably one of the worst possible people to undertake this exploration, as I seem to have an extremely meager visionary capacity. When I try drugs that send other people into fantastic worlds of sci-fi civilizations or speak with ancient sages, I receive fleeting images and slight emanations. My intense desire to reach a visionary state may stem from my struggle against this incapacity.

[15] My grandmother had lived through a sad story of immigrant America—her father came from Poland, and when he could not find a job in New York, he killed himself, leaving his family in desperate straits. Later on, in revenge, the family destroyed his papers and all traces of him. This repressive act had shaped my grandmother's mental life.

IN MOVIES SUCH AS “BEING JOHN MALKOVICH,” “eXistenZ,” AND “THE MATRIX,” THE CULTURE EXPLORES ITS SECRET, INADMISSIBLE FASCINATION WITH THE BANISHED MIND DRUGS, ON THE LEVEL OF FABLE.

as “Being John Malkovich,” “The Matrix” and “eXistenZ” all begin with the concept of porous identities, with trips through various levels of reality, exploding into fantasies of schizo-paranoia. In these films, realities nest with each other and collapse over and over again—a vision of metaphysical insecurity. In “The Matrix” and “eXistenZ,” reality is shown to be unstable, programmable, irrational. The protagonist of “Being John Malkovich” is a pathetic, ’60s counterculture holdover, a puppeteer, and the film brilliantly explores issues of mimesis and personal identity that strongly suggest a post-LSD ego meltdown.

It is obvious to me that the hidden subtext of these films is the LSD experience—how LSD can disrupt the ordering principles of conventional reality, leading to frightening plunges into ego-dissolution. “The Matrix” makes this explicit in a scene where the hero is offered two pills. One opens him to “reality,” and the other makes him forget the offer altogether (a bit like LSD versus Prozac). In movies such as these, the culture explores its secret, inadmissible fascination with the banished mind drugs, on the level of fable.

15.

Scientists don’t know exactly how iboga affects the brain. One speculative theory is that its alkaloid nature restores a balance between the brain’s two halves. People prone to addiction suffer from an imbalance between the left and right hemispheres. This disparity disrupts REM sleep, and iboga, or ibogaine, accesses REM cycling in a powerful way. After taking a large dose, many people report their need for sleep is reduced by several hours, for weeks or even months afterwards. According to this theory, ibogaine returns to psychically damaged people the healing power of their sleep and dreams.

When I returned to New York, I needed less sleep for a while. I mulled over the Bwiti initiation. The psychedelic had given me such strange figments, such glancing views. For a few hours, I was granted a powerful lens through which I could view my life—that fragile assemblage of habits, moods and relationships—like an object seen through a magnifying glass. More memorable than the greed of the king, the emotional power of my insights stayed with me as indelible lessons.

I am still waiting to discover what touchers can teach.