



## **Psychedelic Trance: ritual, belief and transcendental experience in modern raves**

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<http://www.dur.ac.uk/anthropology.journal/vol16/iss2/papadimitropoulos.pdf>

### **Abstract**

Ethnographic fieldwork in various non-industrialised societies around the globe has demonstrated that dance is often related to trance: states of mind in which ordinary conscious awareness is usually partly and temporarily suspended. In these ethnographic instances, trance states are institutionalised and form a part of the religious norm. There, it appears that trance- induced naturally or chemically with certain drugs- is related to possession by spirits and deities and thus is an instrument of ritualistic and religious importance because it provides the basis for experiencing the ‘sacred’ or the ‘supernatural’. But what happens in a western cultural context when, usually, young people gather in so-called ‘raves’ and dance non-stopped within a large crowd, often under the influence of psychedelic drugs? This introductory paper focuses on the description of the “psychedelic trance” subculture, in relation to the contexts of its historical socio-cultural emergence, past and present perceptions of shamanistic cultures, and to brain cognition.

**Keywords:** trance, raves, ritual, music, transcendental experience, dancing.

### **Introduction**

Theoretical research and fieldwork in various ‘traditional’ societies around the globe indicates that dance, defined as a purposeful and intentionally rhythmical patterned activity that derives from music<sup>68</sup>, is often related to trance: states of mind in which ordinary conscious awareness is usually partly and temporarily suspended. More important is the fact that in some societies, such as those of Western Africa, trance states are institutionalized and form a part of the religious life of the people so concerned. There, it appears that trance – induced naturally or chemically with certain drugs – is related to possession by spirits and deities, and thus is an instrument of ritualistic and religious importance because it provides the basis of experiencing the ‘sacred’ or the ‘supernatural’. In other words, through listening to music and dancing a qualitative change occurs in the minds of individuals that facilitates what they perceive as a religious or transcendental experience<sup>69</sup>.

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<sup>68</sup> We can define music as “humanly organised sound” (Blacking, 1976: 1).

<sup>69</sup> One definition of religion regards it as that which is concerned with, or related to the ‘sacred’. Since some, but not all, transcendental experiences are experiences of the sacred, and since some, but not all, religious experiences are



In a different cultural context, that is in the industrialised West<sup>70</sup>, usually (but not always) young people, members of what sociologists label countercultural groups, have for the last fifteen years used to gather in large numbers – ideally outdoors – and dance passionately for many hours under the sounds of extremely loud repetitive electronic music, often under the influence of drugs. Such musical activities are known as ‘raves’. At first glance, what people do in raves seems to be quite unrelated to what people do during trance states in non-industrialised societies mainly because the formers’ goal is entertainment whereas the latter’s aim is religious in character, and is guided by a structure of custom. On a closer look, however, evidence suggests that certain special qualities of both the sound and the drugs can produce perceptual changes, and thus may facilitate an encounter with the transcendental. Interestingly, it is precisely these two factors – music and drugs – which are seen by members of such countercultural groups as crucial in altering their normal state of being and creating a feeling of ecstasy that is a mystical experience which by some may be interpreted as a religious one. Hence, my interest in this essay is to explore whether modern day raves have a mystical aspect from the viewpoint of the participant, or if they are just a cynical attempt to trap young people into drug dependency. Therefore, the focus of this paper is on perceptions and practices concerning altered states of consciousness.

Much of the work conducted on altered states of consciousness has been disturbing to social anthropologists because it has emphasised psychological processes over social function and structure and, as Atkinson observes, “in some cases implied a reduction of symbolism and ritual to psychobiological functions” (Atkinson, 1992: 311). On the other hand, religious behaviour, as any kind of human behaviour, is a product of the interaction of sociocultural and personality influences. For this reason then we should not try to explain social psychological facts by relying only on sociological theories. Thereby, my attempt to understand the neurophysiology of trance does not imply an explanation of the associated structures of ritual, knowledge, and society.

## Historical Background

Firstly, it is useful to account for such parties as the ‘raves’, and throw some light on the motives of the organisers and the participants. The material that follows was gathered through participant observation in both indoor and outdoor “raves” in the United Kingdom, Italy and Greece as well as by literature review. It must also be emphasised that I will refer to only one branch of the so-called ‘rave’ culture — which is erroneously perceived as homogenous and therefore even the aforementioned term ‘rave culture’ is a mere generalisation<sup>71</sup> — namely the ‘psychedelic trance’ dance movement.<sup>72</sup> As the adjective ‘psychedelic’ suggests there is a kind of music called ‘trance’

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transcendental we may agree with Walsh and Vaughan that “there is clearly some overlap between transcendental experiences and religious experience” (Walsh and Vaughan, 1993:6).

<sup>70</sup> Of course, I do not in any way consider the “west” to form a closed or homogenous cultural system since such a thing does not exist. But I do hold that there are particular philosophical and theological ideas and assumptions, as well as value orientations that developed historically which are shared among the different peoples of so-called west. These structure our conception of the cosmos and define man's position in it.

<sup>71</sup> It is a mistake to ascribe a single life-style or ideological orientation to that stage in the life cycle that we call youth. As sociologists demonstrate “there is extremely wide range of alternative values and lifestyles held by youth whose apparent homogeneity is largely a journalistic myth” (Zablocki and Kanter, 1976: 281). Additionally, as Davis and Munoz have indicated for hippies, there may be a value tension even within subcultures. In the case of hippies such a value tension was observed “between contemplative, inwardly- directed forms of ‘mind expansion’ and more hedonistically oriented forms of sensual excess”; this distinction between individuals was designated by the terms “heads” and “freaks” respectively (Davis and Munoz, 1968: 156).

<sup>72</sup> The ‘psychedelic trance’ music as an ‘underground’ type of electronic music can be contrasted to more ‘mainstream’ and popular electronic music like ‘house’, ‘progressive house’, ‘garage’ and ‘trance’ music. Through personal observation and contact with peer groups I believe it is correct to relate the latter with club culture which then should be



that is different than ‘psychedelic trance’. Indeed, ‘trance’ is a more general category and refers to a kind of fast dance electronic music. Why it came to be named as such is doubtful, but the fact that it can actually induce trance states- at least in the eyes of its creators and dancers should be considered a serious possibility. Unfortunately, I cannot prove this claim but I can only pin-point at the fact that people can dance intensively even for more than ten hours!

The ‘psychedelic trance’ movement was imported in the early 1990’s from the shores of Goa in India where many hippies had settled after the decline of the hippie movement in the early 1970’s. It sampled fragments of the views of people like Timothy Leary and tried to create a new ground for the psychedelic tradition, confirming that the hippy ‘ethic’ was in renaissance, and that it was not simply a barren imitation of the sixties but something entirely new (Colin, 1997). Thus, psychedelic and hippy ideals merged with electronic dance music resulting in an aggressive and fast, but at the same time rhythmical, electronic music whose melody – indeed difficult to be perceived by non-receptive ears – is created by the combination of a basic repetitive fast beat<sup>73</sup>, that resembles the sound of African drums, with other peculiar electronically produced sounds often inspired by natural sounds such as those of thunders, water drops or bird singing.

These sounds produced by disc jockeys (DJs), the accompanying non-stop dance, and feelings of euphoria and ecstasy, which are facilitated and more quickly reached but not entirely created by the use hallucinogenic drugs like LSD and psychedelic mushrooms, bring about an atmosphere that is perceived as mystical and is thus imagined as similar to shamanic tribal drumming. For the music to take proper physical and psychological effect it has to be played as loud and for as long as possible. But it is very important to note that the ‘psychedelic trance’ dance scene is often seen by participants as a contemporary version of the ancient dance drug rituals of tribal shamans – an idea that resembles that of hippies who fancied themselves as white Indians<sup>74</sup>. Thereby, in various internet sites<sup>75</sup>, designed by the organisers of such raves, one sees explicit the belief that they are in some way connected to prehistoric tribes who had celebrated in music and dance thousands of years earlier in the same surroundings, and some still do in other places of the world; that free parties are shamanic rites, which using the new musical technologies in combination with certain drugs and long periods of dancing- preferably in settings of spiritual significance- can bring urban youth closer to the earth with which they have lost contact, hence focusing on the consequences of the contemporary ecological crisis.

## Discussion

From this description of the ‘psychedelic trance’ dance movement it is evident that members of such countercultural groups have very little understanding of the function of trance and dance, and the relation between the two in other traditional societies, or of the cultural imperatives that urge the individual towards employing such tactics. It seems rather that they have naively idealised and exoticised a ‘primitive’ culture – a common lay strategy which usually manifests no real interest in such cultures or in how tribal peoples see the world that surrounds us.

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contrasted to the so-called rave culture. The basic difference between the two lies in that there is no specific lifestyle or ‘ideology’ deriving out of the club culture – which is mainly hedonistic in character – whereas a more ‘egalitarian’ and ‘spiritual’ way of life seems to be suggested by the rave culture. This is manifested in that free parties are seen as ideal, while clubs can be described as “selling you a good night”. In addition, clubbers are often described as “fashion victims”, even in the use of drugs, that is in that they use the hedonistic drug known as ‘ecstasy’ (MDMA), instead of hallucinogenic drugs (LSD, psychedelic mushrooms, mescaline, etc.) which are seen as ‘spiritual’ drugs.

<sup>73</sup> The usual sequence of the beat is between 138 and 152 bpm (beats per minute).

<sup>74</sup> The Psychedelic Library Homepage. 1979. <http://www.psychedelic-library.org/grinspoo.htm>.

<sup>75</sup> The Gaian Mind Psychedelic Community. 2001. *The Gaian Mind*. Available at: <http://gaian-mind.com/about>.



In Western African communities such as those of the Fon in Niger, the Dogon in Mali, and the Shilak in Nigeria, people go into trance by dancing to worship their gods, control the dangerous forces of nature and call down divine power into themselves. On occasion such a dance in West Africa may even have a clearly social function, like when crime is controlled by the witch-finding trance dance which discovers criminals (Gorer, 1944: 39). But in general, as Gorer points out, it appears that for West Africans<sup>76</sup> trance – dance is a very important mechanism which “gives meaning to their lives and unites them with the forces which control their universe” (*Ibid*). The same function of trance has been observed in various traditional societies like in the Lapps’ shamanistic rites – where magic drums are again important for inducing trance states (Hultkrantz, 1955) – or for trance in Bali (Holt and Bateson, 1944).

To believe that non-Western dance represents earlier stages of Western dance is like falling into the trap to think that modern non-Western peoples represent earlier stages of Western cultural evolution. Nevertheless, it appears that youngsters in psychedelic trance parties do actually experience what we call altered states of consciousness, that is experiences that seem to transcend our usual conception of ourselves<sup>77</sup>, and can therefore be interpreted as mystical. This is suggested by participants who often experience hallucinations or synesthesia,<sup>78</sup> which is the capacity to experience sensations of several kinds as a result of stimulation of one sense only (Neher 1980:9). For example, one’s auditory apparatus is stimulated by the music but at the same time the person can ‘see’ the music, that is feel that the music is ‘blue’ or that the sound is a ‘spinning-top’. One could easily claim that such experiences are the effects of the drugs young people use and thus reduce such parties to an epiphenomenon of drug use. But consciousness alteration is found in over 90% of the societies represented in the Human Relation Area Files and, as De Rios observes, “it is accomplished by a wide array of sensory deprivation and sensory overload techniques” (De Rios, 1974:161)<sup>79</sup>. What we see here is that the use of psychotropic drugs, that is drugs which cause psychological change or modification of mental activity, is a widespread phenomenon in non-industrialised societies where, as we already said, the use of drums and violent motion can produce trance states. In the contexts of modern psychedelic trance subcultures, the use of drugs like cannabis, LSD, ‘magic’ mushrooms and mescaline<sup>80</sup> and the aggressive dance is studied by sociologists and regarded as a problem, whereas in a ‘traditional’ sociocultural context similar activities and altered states of consciousness are observed by anthropologists, and considered to form a part of the natives’ consistent metaphysical system and world view.<sup>81</sup>

<sup>76</sup> For an ethnographic account of these groups see Mercel Griaule (1965) for the Dogon; Gilbert Rouget (1985) for the Fon and the Shilak; and Jean Rouch’s ethnographic film *Les maîtres fous* (1955) on the Fon. Lewis, I. in *Ecstatic Religion* (1989) refers to the Yoruba of Nigeria for similar functions of trance states.

<sup>77</sup> For a more detailed description of transcendental states see Neher, 1980.

<sup>78</sup> In regard to synaesthesia, Neher suggests that hereditary mechanisms may be important factors in creating it (Neher, 1980:9).

<sup>79</sup> Interestingly, De Rios sites Wasson and Wasson (1957) who have argued that “hallucinogenic use is a major factor in explaining the world of demons and gods which have entered into man’s beliefs throughout the world” (De Rios, 1974: 152). She also refers to Levi-Strauss (1970) who has shown the distribution of American Indian use of psychotropic mushrooms outside of Mexico to include California Indians, Salish, Kwakiutl, Menomini, Blackfoot, Omaha, Iroquois, Gé, Mundurucù, Yurimagua, Tukuna, Jicarill Apache, and the Argentine Toba (De Rios, 1974: 151). De Rios herself, in her article writing about the religion of the Mayas suggests that the particular substances of psychotropic Flora and Fauna “may have influenced their world view” (*Ibid*:148).

<sup>80</sup> Mescaline is the synthetic of the peyote cactus which is used among North and South American Indians as a means to make contact with the spirit world. In Mesoamerica it has been used for more than two thousand years (Barfield, 1997: 132).

<sup>81</sup> I am not trying to equate the use of psychotropic substances in different historical, social and cultural situations; rather I am implying that whereas the activity is to a certain extent the same it is invested by different meanings, and has



But since altered states of consciousness, like trance, exist in such diverse cultural settings, it follows that there must be a common denominator to all mankind. This common denominator is the human brain, and for our purposes we should agree with Jackson that “what is true at the neurophysiological level must be universally true, irrespective of society or the individual” (Jackson, 1968: 297).<sup>82</sup>

It has been suggested that certain unnoticed links exist between the auditory apparatus and the peculiar sensation we interpret as mystical or religious experience, that may involve a feeling of a supernatural presence. Such an approach focuses on psychophysiological processes which are considered as partly responsible for arousing religious feelings (Tuzin, 1984). More specifically, under certain conditions and in certain forms, aural stimuli may become instrumental in creating transcendental experiences. Naturally occurring sounds like the thunder or other similar ones may arouse a strange sense of anxiety which is perceived as “intrinsically mysterious” (Tuzin, 1984: 579), and is thus unconsciously interpreted as being of supernatural nature – since the supernatural has always been mysterious. Interestingly, however, the sounds that can create this anxiety, disrupt sensorimotor function, and trigger such an association are not the ones we can hear but those we cannot. These are infrasonic sound waves whose frequencies are below conscious human perception<sup>83</sup>; it is infrasonic sound waves which the thunder produces.<sup>84</sup>

In addition, certain evocative ritual sounds, such as those produced by large drums, bear a resemblance to or are in fact imitative of these naturally occurring sounds. Their effect may thus be to produce religious sentiment, but not in a direct way as, for instance, when someone feels relaxed under the sound of classical music. It rather seems that the association between the ritual sound and the accompanying feeling of religiosity is unintentional and occurs again unconsciously.

We should also take under serious consideration that the “cross-cultural popularity of drumbeats” (Tuzin, 1984: 581) – which can be even electronically produced – may have to do with their ability to help to induce mind-altered states that may be interpreted as ecstatic, mystical or religious. Interestingly, it has been argued that the rhythm, the drumbeats have can affect the central nervous system which modifies brain activity in a way that produces abnormal states such as trance. Neher (1962, cited in Tuzin, 1984)<sup>85</sup>, by discovering a correlation between drum rhythms of an effective frequency for causing abnormal states (7-9 cycles per second) and the normal range of brain wave frequency (8-13 cycles per second), suggested that the tuning of outer and inner rhythms is probably sufficient for inducing trance (Tuzin, 1984: 581). If there is any validity in the aforementioned theories then perhaps we can hypothesize that young people dancing under the sounds of a repetitive electronic drumbeat, whose rhythm, has neither a beginning nor an end, can actually fall into trance. However, this is not to underestimate the effects of powerful psychoactive drugs, like L.S.D, which

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different function and structure. We should also stress that native cultures are acutely aware that over indulgence in drug use can undermine social order, and therefore there are rules to regulate access to the drugs (Lebot et al., 1992, cited in Barfield, 1997: 132).

<sup>82</sup> It is generally agreed that the chimpanzee is the closest primate to man in regard to behaviour and genetic make-up. Jackson notices this, and remarks that “the astonishing thing is that chimpanzees living freely and undisturbed in the forest like to drum and dance!” (Jackson, 1968: 297). Jackson cites Reynolds, V. (1965) “Budongo: A Forest and its Chimpanzees” as source for details of a chimpanzee festival of dancing and drumming.

<sup>83</sup> Approximately below 20 hertz.

<sup>84</sup> On this basis we can perhaps trace “a link between thunder and religiosity” and explain the widespread personification of thunder as the voice of God (Tuzin, 1984: 585-87). It is also interesting to note that a deaf ritual specialist is an anomaly, whereas a blind one is common enough. (Jackson, 1968) and (Tuzin, 1984).

<sup>85</sup> Neher’s views have been challenged on the basis that the alignment of inner and outer rhythms in the way he suggested is unlikely to occur. See Rouget, 1977, “Music and Possession Trance” in Blacking J. (ed.) “The Anthropology of the Body”, pp. 233-39.



drastically alter human consciousness and can create experiences that are interpreted as transcendental or religious.

In our daily lives we separate between subject (ourselves) and object (the material world ‘out there’). This separateness is of survival value for us because it enables the subject (us) to make decisions and manipulate the object through voluntary activity. What we call conscious, the “I” state of daily life, our perception and thinking, is a result of cortical interpretation, that is of the activity of the outer layers of our brains. By contrast, subcortical activity is responsible for our subconscious. The fact that we are able to separate between subject and object is “a reflection of the relative independence of cortical interpretation from subcortical activity” (Fischer, 1971: 902). Under the influence of hallucinogenic drugs the ability to perceive the environment in the usual way and the constancy of the visual world diminish, and the subject turns inward; space and time are also distorted, while inner sensations dominate. Characteristically, the capacity to verify these changes “through voluntary motor activity” disappears (*ibid.*), and it is common in sites of psychedelic trance parties for people to state that they were overpowered and not free, or, quite the opposite, that they did not experience the subject-object dichotomy of everyday life.

These changes in perception indicate that the individual has a restricted interpretative ability of his or her experience which can thus be perceived (at the moment he is living it) either as creative (artistic, religious) or psychotic experience. In the case of an ecstatic experience, the person will structure it according to his belief system. Hence, a man can feel one with the divinity, whereas another one can feel the oneness of everything or of the universe. Thereby, the aforementioned separateness between subject and object ceases to exist, and this may be the result of the drugs affecting the cortical and subcortical activity to the extent that the two become “indistinguishably integrated” (Fischer, 1971: 901). In other words, the experience of the oneness with the universe that we interpret as a religious one may in fact be the result of our conscious and subconscious becoming one; or, to put it otherwise, that for a while we are, in a sense, aware of our subconscious.

We saw how certain properties of sound can create altered states of consciousness, bring people into trance and facilitate mystical experience. We also focused on similar conditions that can be brought about by the use of hallucinogenic drugs. However, this does not mean that all drug experiences are mystical, but, obviously, we cannot prove that no drug experiences are mystical. To ask ourselves whether the experiences hallucinogenic drugs induce differ from religious experiences reached naturally is asking the wrong question. The reason is that in this phenomenological level, that is in the descriptive one, “drug experiences cannot be distinguished from their natural religious counterpart” (Smith, 1993: 93).

Music, drugs and continuing dance can induce trance regardless of whether we talk about the shamanic dance of the Lapps or the ‘psychedelic trance’ parties of countercultural groups. We should add another factor which can also produce heights of ecstasy: the “emotional contagion” of groups (Neher, 1980: 69). Parties, parades and religious ceremonies are all examples of events where a specific feeling of joy or sorrow, precisely because is felt by many people at the same time, is magnified and can thus become very intense as to make a whole crowd to dance, cheer, or cry.

These considerations may lead us to conclude that in a ‘psychedelic trance’ party the potentials for the participants to fall into a trance state are actually there. It is doubtful, however, if the participants have any understanding of what their activities actually involve. Whether or not these were the intentions of the people who introduced these parties in the first place is not certain; the same can be said for the creators of this type of electronic music.



## Conclusion

In conclusion, from the preceding discussion it is apparent that, in the so-called ‘West,’ an altered state of consciousness can often be portrayed as an anti-social mode of being and it is thus not highly valued. This is indicated by the fact that we classify movements like the one that was presented here as marginal and countercultural. As anthropologists, we know that each culture categorizes experience differently. Goleman correctly observes that “the study of a code different from our own can lead us to concepts and aspects of reality from which our own way of looking at the world excludes us” (Goleman, 1993: 18). There are cultures, such as shamanic, which value altered states of consciousness, and therefore construct their image of the world from multiple states. By contrast, ‘Western’ culture focuses largely on the usual “I” state of being, or the usual waking state. This focus appears to have created in ‘Western’ culture a deep rooted fear of altered states of consciousness, a fear which can perhaps be traced to a Christianity ethic imposed over Western people. This fear can probably explain the general suspicion of techniques such as meditation, but most importantly, it reveals the complexity of the religious experience and the multiplicity of ways for reaching the ‘sacred’.

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