

Thomas Hatsis, *The Witches' Ointment: The Secret History of Psychedelic Magic* (Rochester, Vt.: Inner Traditions 2015), 304 pp., \$19.95 paper; *Psychedelic Mystery Traditions: Spirit Plants, Magical Practices, Ecstatic States* (Rochester, Vt.: Inner Traditions, 2018), 288 pp., B&W illustrations, \$19.99 softcover.

Two figures stand in the background of these two books by Thomas Hatsis, a Portland, Oregon-based “historian of psychedelia.” One is the anthropologist Michael Harner (1929–2018) who wrote about his ayahuasca experiences with the Amazonian Shuar people, served on Carlos Castaneda’s doctoral committee, developed the concept of “core shamanism” in the 1970s, and then from 1979 until his death devoted himself to his Foundation for Shamanic Studies. While he was still an academic anthropologist, he published an article, “Hallucinogen Plants in European Witchcraft,” part of his edited collection *Hallucinogens and Shamanism* (Oxford, 1973), which opened the door to much more research, speculation, and outright embracing of “shamanic witchcraft.”

The other is John Allegro (1923–1988), British archaeologist, translator of some of the Dead Sea Scrolls, and author of the highly controversial and career-ending book, *The Sacred Mushroom and The Cross: A Study of the Nature and Origins of Christianity within the Fertility Cults of the Ancient Near East* (Houghton and Stodder, 1973). Some high-profile writers on entheogens such as Gordon Wasson and Carl A. P. Ruck supported Allegro’s thesis, however. Hatsis likewise supports the idea of Christianity as an entheogenic sex cult, but says that Allegro had it all wrong – the cult was not covered up, and the entheogens were different. You might think that the idea that “Jesus was a mushroom” was a rhetorical dead horse, but Hatsis supplies further beating.

One reviewer of Allegro’s book said the book was “difficult to read and difficult to summarize, because he follows clues that criss-cross different cultures and lead into many-layered webs of association.” The same judgment might be made here.

The history of the Renaissance and early modern witch trials is terribly complicated – one reason that new research and publishing continue – and the very existence and composition of any ointments

that figured in these alleged witchcraft events is a complicated sub-problem. *The Witches' Ointment* attempts to sort it out, but is marred by extensive cherry-picking of evidence, wild jumps from century to century, and a frequent lack of context for its assertions. The author notes that he does not "wish to reduce medieval and early modern period magic to drug use . . . but to show first how these drugs fit in with the broader system of magic, and second, how the early modern church demonized the experiences people had while using these drugs (*TWO* xvii)." What works against this scheme is his own tendency to jump from seventeenth-century Norway to sixteenth-century Rome to eleventh-century Byzantium to a contemporary Tik-Tok video in a short space, all the while giving a wink and nod to the reader with frequent asides like "Needless to say, it gets a little weird" (*PSM* 108). *The Witches' Ointment* could have used less Charles Fort-style collecting and more analysis and contextualization of each incident or report.

There is no current one view on witches' ointments. Some historians regard them as mere fantasies or as a sort of plot device on the part of prosecutors, first Catholic and then Protestant/secular, who were familiar with antecedents from *The Golden Ass* or Homer's *Odyssey*. Hatisis, however, regards all mentions of "poisons" as pointing towards the use of psychoactive drugs, mostly the Solanaceae—mandrake, henbane, and datura being the most common. If we don't know what it was, it was probably an entheogen.

Hatisis rightly argues that attitudes towards ointments as an indicator of malevolent witchcraft changed in the mid-1400s, as what was previously most often viewed as individual magical malice was transformed into a larger theory of a heretical cult involving multitudes of people and presided over by His Satanic Majesty himself. Yet as he acknowledges, the story is fuzzy and complicated. When were people misusing legitimate home arthritis remedies? If they got high and "flew" under that influence, had they opened themselves spiritually to the Devil? Yet—under torture—accused witches frequently were prompted to say that the Devil or his servants gave them ointments to help them fly to their assemblies. His final short chapter, "Morning on Bare Mountain" attempts to sort out and discuss different approaches to the ointment question, but feels rushed. There is enough material in *The Witches' Ointment* for a more cogent treatment, but it would require a more patient and organized approach.

The century-hopping approach carries on in *Psychedelic Mystery Traditions*, which bounces quickly and a-historically through ancient representations of mushrooms (pre-historic), opium poppies (Bronze Age) and haoma (Iron Age) to its central thesis: When Jesus failed to return soon enough, “a new spirituality was needed to explain the failures [of his promised return]” (PSM 109). Scriptures fail our author, who must admit that nowhere do the gospels reveal the mechanics or medicines of Jesus’ miracles. “But there might be some ancillary evidence outside the gospels” (PSM 124). Let’s see: Jesus cast out demons, and the first-century CE historian Josephus wrote about mandrake, which removed evil spirits. “We can only speculate,” but was Jesus using entheogens for spiritual healing? “*Maybe*” (PSM 125, italics in the original).

From there we learn that the apostle Paul “hatched a plan” to turn the Hebrew food-blessing into the eucharistic mystery of the wine-blood and bread-body. He thus “opened the door for pagan converts into Christianity to mix their traditional entheogens and mythogenic pharmaka into their Eucharists, whether this occurred at the Lord’s Supper or not” (PSM 128). Hatsis also dwells upon more sexually oriented approaches to gnostic groups. He relies on literal readings of ancient texts, e.g. the “bridal chamber” of the gnostic Gospel of Philip can only be an actual room where people have sex, not a metaphor for a spiritual experience. Likewise, if the church father Origen (c. 184–c. 253) refers to “mandrake,” he must be referencing actual consumption of the soporific herb, not using as a metaphor for spiritual sleep.

The remainder of the book returns to the late medieval and early-modern concerns of *The Witches’ Ointment*. Hatsis deserves credit for his debunking of the “Santa Claus was a flying shaman” narratives that continues to pop up and for demonstrating that the frequent association of Santa’s now typically red-and-white costume with *Amanita muscaria* mushrooms involves a misreading of nineteenth-century German and Austrian New Year’s greeting cards. The red-and-white garb was created instead by commercial artists working for Coca-Cola, who painted Santa Claus in the drink’s signature colors for mid-twentieth century magazine advertisements.

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