



The Alchemy of Culture: Intoxicants in Society

Richard Rudgley

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From opium in Stone Age Europe to petrol sniffing in aboriginal Australia, intoxicants have always featured prominently in societies all over the world. In this study, the author shows how "magic mushrooms" in Siberia and New Guinea, the mysterious "haoma" plant in ancient India and Iran, and "yaje", peyote and tobacco in the New World have all played a central role in the religious or social life of the community, and that altered states of consciousness produced by each intoxicant are shaped by cultural values. The book also explores the use of psychoactive substances in European witchcraft, and the way that scientists, poets and artists introduced new hallucogens, such as mescaline and LSD into the West. A final chapter examines the social aspects of milder stimulants such as coffee, tea, betel, qat, cola, coca and kava and the rituals surrounding them, showing that their significance extends beyond the simple pleasure of the individual to the religious, legal, economic, political and sexual life of communities. This book is the 1991 winner of the Prometheus award, made for the most outstanding synopsis for a first book by a young unpublished author in the field of archaeology, ethnography or ancient history.

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