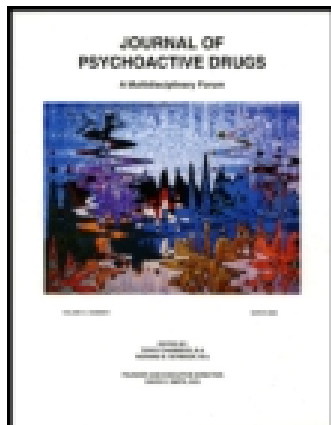


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Tales of a Shaman's Apprentice: An Ethnobotanist Searches for New Medicines in the Rain Forest

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Book Review

Plotkin, Mark. *Tales of a Shaman's Apprentice: An Ethnobotanist Searches for New Medicines in the Rain Forest*. (New York: Penguin Books, 1994). 352 pages.

Reviewed by John C. Rhead, Ph.D.^a

Mark Plotkin wrote this fascinating book 20 some years ago, detailing his various journeys in the Amazon rain forest during the preceding decade. It is as engaging as any adventure of Indiana Jones, which makes it all the more amazing in light of the fact that it is a true story. Plotkin is initially driven by a passionate curiosity about the medicinal use of plants, and seems to be a diligent and competent ethnobotanist. He befriends members of remote indigenous tribes, including some shamans, and persuades them to reveal to him some of the vast knowledge they have. As things progress, he also becomes quite passionate about trying to save both the rain forest and the knowledge that has been accumulated over many centuries by these indigenous people.

Plotkin has a particular interest in the use of psychoactive plant substances by shamans as an aid to their journeying to realms of reality from which they can derive healing powers. This use of psychoactive plant substances is almost certainly the oldest such use. For readers of *JPD* who are interested in the use of psychoactive substances, whether derived from plants or synthesized in a laboratory, *Tales of a Shaman's Apprentice* offers a glimpse back through time at some of the most interesting uses for such substances. The author gives a moving account of the one opportunity he had to experience the effects of one of these substances¹ when it was administered to him in the form of snuff by a shaman.

¹It was a combination of two substances, something the scientist Plotkin is able to deduce after returning from his powerful inner journey.

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A recent article by Moncrieff et al. (2013) opens up a wider perspective on the reports of Plotkin in *Tales of a Shaman's Apprentice*. This article suggests that many drugs used in psychiatry may not directly impact any presumed underlying disease-specific cause for a particular type of psychological or psychiatric disturbance. Instead, it is suggested, such drugs may be psychoactive in that they produce a change in consciousness that provides relief from psychiatric symptoms regardless of their cause. Plotkin addresses similar issues that come up when he compares the medicinal uses of plants between different tribes. He finds one tribe may use Plant A to treat Condition 1 and Plant B to treat Condition 2, while another tribe has equal success using Plant A with Condition 2 and Plant B with Condition 1. Just as each new psychiatric medication soon has “off-label” uses discovered by adventuresome and creative psychiatrists, so do Plotkin's indigenous shamans raise for our consideration the question of disease-specific actions of substances versus their psychoactive properties that may make them useful in a variety of conditions, especially when both patient and practitioner expect a positive outcome.

Perhaps even more interesting is the question of the need for a psychoactive substance at all. Plotkin reports that some shamans use one or another psychoactive substance to help them travel in their shamanic journeys to other realities, while other shamans use no substances at all for this purpose. The modern version of this is the double-blind controlled study of a modern synthetic psychoactive compound in which a subject in the control group (no drug or presumed placebo) will occasionally have a powerful experience that is indistinguishable from the experiences one expects to be reported by subjects in the experimental group. Andrew Weil pointed out over 40 years ago in his book *The Natural Mind* that the experiences associated with the ingestion of psychoactive substances are not contained in the substance. These experiences reside in the mind, or consciousness, and psychoactive substances offer but one method of accessing them.

In short, *Tales of a Shaman's Apprentice* is a fascinating adventure story of the author's journeys, both

external and internal, and offers much food for thought for those interested in the history and mechanisms of action of psychoactive substances.

REFERENCE

- Moncrieff, J.; Cohen, D. & Porter, S. 2013. The psychoactive effects of psychiatric medication: The elephant in the room. *Journal of Psychoactive Drugs* 45 (5): 409–415.

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