Bourguignon

Altered States of Consciousness (ASC). A broad umbrella term, it covers a range of different phases of human behavior and experience. It implies that awareness consists of discrete states, varying with regard to alertness, memory, perception, time sense, body image and other functions, such as increased suggestibility. These "altered" states are contrasted with a "normal" state of ordinary waking consciousness, which ranges from alert to relaxed. An increase or decrease of alertness reflects a greater or lesser arousal of the Central Nervous System. Such states may be induced by greater or lesser stimulation, motor activity or emotion, and also by factors affecting both biological and psychological functions, such as either insufficient or excessive food intake, sleep deprivation, hormonal disturbances or psychoactive drugs. Most of the states are neither unusual nor dramatic but are part of ordinary life. They include several forms of sleep and dreaming (see Dreams), daydreaming, extreme boredom, drowsiness as well as "inspiration," that is, creative breakthroughs or heightened insight, as well as "peak" or "flow" experiences that are not necessarily religious in nature. Of particular interest to anthropologists are states that are institutionalized in a religious context. These are variously referred to as ecstasy, trance, possession, shamanism, visions, religious enthusiasm, transcendence, etc. Laboratory research into ASC, particularly with respect to hallucinogenic drugs, sensory deprivation...
experiments, and various forms of meditation, were carried out in the U.S., Canada and Europe during the 1960s and 1970s. Some of this research was sponsored by government agencies, such as the CIA. Since then both popular and scientific interest has waned and the neurophysiology of ASC is still little understood. For cultural anthropology, ASC are of interest in that the behavior is stylized and influenced by learning, meanings are culturally defined, experience is interpreted within a cultural context, methods of induction and termination of ASC are often traditional and specialists in ASC are found in most societies. Practices involving ASC are ancient as well as widespread. Evidence is found in prehistoric art; for example, the "dead" man in the cave paintings at Lascaux has been interpreted as a shaman in trance. In complex contemporary societies, such as that of the United States, many forms of ASC are institutionalized and practiced in a variety of religious as well as secular contexts. The subject of ASC has long been of interest to anthropologists, students of religion and other scholars (see Bibliography and Filmography). Much scattered descriptive material has been recorded. A large-scale comparative statistical study by Bourguignon and associates (reported in Religion, Altered States of Consciousness and Social Change, 1973) found one or more forms of ASC, institutionalized in a religious context, in 90% of a large sample of societies drawn from all parts of the world. This high frequency has since been confirmed by other statistical
Bourguignon

studies. Such ASC may be grouped according to their cultural interpretation into two broad categories: those where ASC is explained as due to possession, or take over, by a spirit or other entity, and those experienced as encounters with spirit beings, or the temporary absence of the trancers own spirit. Where non-possession trance is sought for the benefit of the community, such as to heal or to divine, the specialist is referred to as a shaman (see shamanism). This practice is linked to a tradition of a spirit journey or "magic flight". Together with vision quests and other spirit encounters, non-possession trance is primarily found in Northern Eurasia and the Americas. In the Americas in particular, induction of such trances often involves the use of hallucinogenic plant substances. This activity is practiced primarily by men. It is associated with small-scale societies that make their living primarily by hunting and gathering, sometimes also pastoralism and horticulture. Possession trance appears more frequently in sub-Saharan Africa and among African Americans, as well as in the Insular Pacific region. It is practiced more often by women, in societies of greater scale where horticulture is present. It generally does not involve the use of drugs. It is an activity carried on before an audience, and the possession trancer is expected not to remember the experience of enacting the presence of the spirit. While music is used in shamanistic ceremonies and in those of possession trance, dance is used primarily in possession trance
religions. Where trance is induced through isolation, meditation and austerities, music is less likely to be found. In Judeo-Christian, Moslem and Hindu traditions, where there exists a belief in the possibility of spirit possession, it is generally considered to be fearful, the possessing spirit entities are identified as demons or souls of dead sinners; such possessions are considered afflictions and exorcists serve as healers who expel possessing spirits. By contrast, in sub-Saharan Africa and in many African American religions, such as santería (Cuba), vodou (Haiti), candomblé, macumba, umbanda (Brazil), possession trance is valued positively, and spirits who are considered to be healers and helpers are invited. That is, possession trance is induced intentionally, through rituals. Drugs are generally not used. In such instances, possession trance specialists act as mediums, as also in Spiritualism. As societies change, particular religious traditions may be modified or lost. Through migrations, traditions may spread to regions where they did not previously exist; for example, African American religions from the Caribbean region have been introduced to the United States in recent years. Also, new religions that make use of ASC are born. In Christianity, belief in demon possession had virtually disappeared from the major denominations. In recent years the practice of exorcism has returned to the Catholic Church. Pentecostal and charismatic groups also seek ASC as "Gifts of the Spirit". New
Bourguignon

possession trance religions have been founded in this country also, for example Channeling. Many new religions using ASC have also appeared in other parts of the world, often as part of revitalization movements. In situations of rapid cultural, social and political transformation, ASC experiences fulfill many functions: they may serve as a language of distress, as a means of personal and group transformation, as sources of political and social innovation, and many more. In these respects, public ASC serve much as, and in conjunction with dreams, which are a private type of ASC.

It has often been argued that ASC and unusual behaviors associated with them, such as the absence of pain in fire walking, are due to hypnosis. However, hypnosis itself is little understood in neurophysiological terms, e.g., no differences in brain wave patterns between hypnotic and waking states of subjects have been found. In the case of Trance Channels such differences have been recently reported by D.J. Hughes and N.T. Melville (in their 1990 paper "Changes in Brain Wave Activity during Trance Channeling: A Pilot Study" The Journal of Transpersonal Psychology 22: 175-189). Changes in biochemistry have also been hypothesized. (See also: Alcohol and Drugs, Belief Systems, Cargo Cults, Millenarian Movements, Dance, Ethnographic Film, Ethnopharmacology, Ethnopsychiatry, Psychological Anthropology, Religion, Religious Conversion, Religious Practitioners, Ritual)
Bourguignon

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