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Raves: A New Religious Experience or Simply a Drug-Induced Trance?

“These are all the kids who ate lunch by themselves in high school. Then they stumbled on this and went 'Whoa, I belong here!’” (Duca). The rave culture provides a spiritual safe haven for people of all ages seeking a spiritual ideology referred to as PLUR (Peace, Love, Unity and Respect). Raves provide a new type of religious experience that is supported by ritual, symbolism and community familiar to traditional religions.

Outsiders assume the spiritual experience of raves is an excuse for the use of hallucinogenic stimulants, such as ecstasy, that create a euphoric sense of bliss. Reverend Matthew Fox, who is an Episcopal priest in San Francisco stated in a Los Angeles Times interview, “The Rave culture did not begin with drugs. You can go to drugs or you can go to religion, go to transcendence, or go for the spiritual power of community and ritual.” While Fox’s views are different than those of most religious leaders, his fundamental belief that younger generations do not connect with traditional religion rings true to many. But they do connect with the music, which can provide a powerful spiritual experience. According to Trance Formation author Robin Sylvan, “New research in brain science confirms the unique capacity of music to transform consciousness and induce powerful religious experiences.”

Music has been connected with spiritualism for thousands of years across all types of music. The word music is derived from the Greek word mousike, which means the sacred realm

of the Muses. Popular qawwali singer Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan said, “When I sing for God I feel like I’m in another world, the spiritual world...I am withdrawn from my materialistic senses, I am totally in my spiritual senses” (Partridge 55). The rave culture gives the kids who are ostracized by their peers, whether at the lunch table or via social media, a place to find solace and a spiritual community.

Rave Culture

The Rave culture began in the late 1950s in Britain. Its popularity soared in the 1980s when the rave scene evolved into weekly illegal warehouse parties in London. The location was kept secret until the night before and it became an underground experience. “The crowd was mixed, black and white, and it is likely that the term 'rave' came from Jamaican usage rather than a revival of any previous usage in Britain” (Evans). The term rave also is known to stand for “Radical Audio Visual Experience.” Today, whether a rave is a small underground event with 200 attendees, or a festival like the annual Electric Daisy Carnival (EDC) in Las Vegas with 185,000 attendees, all raves have one thing in common: “centrality of continuously mixed electronic dance music that people dance to for hours” (Sylvan).

Are Raves a New Form of Church?

Many people who have never attended a rave, simply think that it’s just another place to dance and take drugs. There are influential religious leaders working to help combat this impression. Even the highly respected Episcopal Bishop Gene Robinson of San Francisco supports alternative Reverend Fox’s non-traditional approach, stating, “He attempts to be a conduit for allowing a new generation to come to terms with creation and the primary human need to worship God” (“Rave Masses’ Seek to Appeal to Those Raised on Television”). Religious leaders such as Fox are using raves as a way to bring young people back to religion by combining the community building aspects of raves, with the music and LED lights and

recreating it in a more traditional setting. Fox even used the basement at Grace Cathedral for some of his early non-traditional rave services targeting young people.

The rave itself can also be similar to a church service in that the DJ acts as the ceremonial leader. There is also typically an opening and closing ceremony to unite all the ravers in the experience. "The ceremonies themselves are eclectic and diverse, and can draw elements from a variety of different spiritual and religious traditions and cultures" (Syvan 109). Serious ravers attend events on a weekly basis, similar to weekly church attendance. They prepare in a ritualistic way and attend events as much for the community of fellow ravers, as for the music itself. Raves are also a safe haven for young people who are many times considered outsiders. "It's not just the music. The sense of community draws people" (Duca).

Further extending the spiritual connection, raves are set up and use objects similar to a traditional church going experience. "To stretch the religious metaphor, DJs are the high priests of the rave ceremony, responding to the mood of the crowd, with their mixing desks symbolizing the altar. Dancing at raves may be construed as the method by which ravers 'worship' the God of altered consciousness" (Saunders).

Spiritual Objects Help Define Rave Culture

All traditional religions have spiritual objects that are part of the ceremonial experience. This holds true for raves as well. The use of altars goes back to the early days of the rave scene. While they are not used at all raves, when they are incorporated, the altars display icons from a mix of different religions, supporting the idea that raves are open to everyone. "These formal altars typically are set on a table covered by fabric, lit by candles and strings of lights, and tend to feature images and icons drawn from a wide variety of religious and spiritual traditions" (Sylvan). In addition to altars, some raves have special chill rooms for meditation which contain shrines. Some larger events even have multiple altars, including a high altar for

the theme of the event and a separate sharing altar where ravers can leave kandi to share the energy of the event with others.

In addition to the iconic altar, raves often incorporate icons and images from a variety of religions, primarily of Indian/Hindu tradition. This includes images of Hindu deities like Shiva, Ganesha, Kali and Krishna, as well as the ying and yang symbols from Taoists. Interestingly, the beliefs in peace, love, unity and respect found in PLUR are very similar to the nine beliefs of Hinduism. These are centered around a belief that all life is sacred, to be loved and revered, and therefore practice ahimsa, noninjury, in thought, word and deed. (“Nine Beliefs of Hinduism”). Indian influences include the use of the Mayan calendar and Native American practices like burning sage or incense for purification. “Wicca is popular as well, as evidenced in images of goddesses, raves held on solstices, equinoxes and their midpoints, and the use of ritual practices like the spiral dance.” (Sylvan 121).

Finally, the advent of PLUR in the rave scene introduced the concept of creating and trading kandi, or plastic beaded bracelets and cuffs, as a way to promote the aspects of peace, love, unity and respect. These iconic symbols are similar to the ceremonial jewelry and masks worn by tribal cultures during spiritual ceremonies. “Trading kandi has long been a sacred ritual in the raver community, symbolizing much more than just swapping beaded bracelets. It’s an exchange that physically and spiritually represents the tenants of PLUR, one of the strongest reminders of why we do what we do” (Khan).

Role of the DJ as the Ceremonial Leader

The DJ can be compared to the priest as the ceremonial leader of a rave. Most people think of DJs as entertainers, whose primary job is to mix and play music. Yet, in the rave culture, DJs are many times compared to shaman leading dancers into the powerful experimental states

that connect them to the sacred (Sylvan). Oakland DJ Sam Shirley explains, “I realized I was playing the role of the shaman, having a tribe, and bringing the tribe on this ceremonial ritual. I facilitate realizations and transformations and healings, and all these things are completely shamanic” (“Trance Formation”). DJs view themselves as spiritual leaders. They control the flow of the music and can create crescendos or drops that cause emotional reactions from the audience. They desire to create an energy in the room that unites everyone on the dance floor and builds a community of dancers at one with the music in a peaceful way. DJ Sannon Titus added, “I want to facilitate a moving spiritual experience for people...I guess you could say I’m shamanically inviting those spirits in and asking them to flow through those who are open, as DJ.” Some DJs go so far as to say that they are acting as a conduit for this spiritual experience. “I have the sense of opening to something larger than myself with I play...I do have a sense of being divinely guided in the choices of music and when I’m truly in a flowing place, the sense of what to play is just coming,” shared DJ Sabrina Page.

The Power of Trance: Feeling the Flow for the First Time

It is hard to describe the rave experience without firsthand experience. While the DJ and the music play a key role in the experience, it is important to understand how the mere exposure to loud electronic dance music for hours physically can cause an altered state of consciousness, even without the aid of substances like ecstasy. “You don’t need to be on drugs to enjoy dance music. No one wants to share an insane, confusing rabbit hole with people who like psytrance” (Martin). This altered state is also referred to as a trance. The concept of trances extends far beyond raves, back to traditional African and Indian cultures thousands of years ago.

Ethnomusicologist Judith Becker explains: “The interpretation of music with trancing is ancient and universal. I suspect most, if not all, societies have some form of institutionalized, religious trance ceremonies that also include music.” (Sylvan 56).

The physical science behind a trance state involved the automatic nervous system (ANS). The ANS is aroused through music until a raver reaches a state of trance. It can cause changes in heart rate, strong waves of emotion, like tears, and changes to the serotonin levels of the brain causing feelings of joyfulness. Ravers call this experience feeling the “flow.” For many it is a life changing experience. “...the euphoric intensity of the experience of ‘getting it’ the first time at a rave, an experience so powerful that it immediately changed their lives in a complete and irrevocable way” (Sylvan 65). One raver, Lloyd Morgan, even compared the flow experience to sex by saying, “Absolutely nothing has taken me to the intense levels that this music does and hold it there. There is nothing like it in the world, it is like reaching an orgasm.”

A Flashback to the Past: Shamanic Experiences Revisited

While the rave culture is considered a fad or trend by outsiders, it can also be compared to ancient shamanic rituals. We tend to think that our generation is the first to come up with an idea, but when we look back in history we can see that it originated from history. For example, in the late 1800s, Indians in Mexico would smoke peyote and mix it with music and dancing around a campfire. “Using peyote to touch the spiritual world has been central to the Navajo religion for hundreds of years” (Hagerty). Solomon Snyder, a neuroscientist at Johns Hopkins said, “Scientists suspect that a key player in mystical experience is the serotonin system. Chemically, peyote, LSD and other psychedelics look a lot like serotonin, and they activate the same receptor.” (“The God Chemical: Brain Chemistry And Mysticism”)

Raves can be compared to their ancient shamanic counterparts in a variety of ways. Cultural Activities, J.B. Vibes said, “I would consider the rave culture that we see today as a modernized form of this same type of shamanic activity. There are still cultures out there that carry on these practices the old fashioned way, and that’s great, but in the western world the shamanic culture has manifested itself in a way that is uniquely fitted to our society. While the

Indians danced around a bright colored fire with loud drums, ravers dance all night to bright flashing LED lights and loud bass drops created by DJs. Some ravers say that a mind altering stimulant like ecstasy is needed to achieve the full spiritual connection, but others will say that dancing for hours in a sleep deprived state to a loud rhythmic beat with the bright flashing lights will put you into the same altered spiritual experiences without the need of drugs.

Religion Redefined for Future Generations

The rave culture provides a spiritual safe haven for people of all ages that provide a new type of spiritual experience that is supported by ritual, symbolism and community familiar to traditional religions. "Traditional religions have had hundreds or even thousands of years to develop effective ceremonial forms, and even these ceremonies don't always hit the mark. In contrast, rave ceremonies, at most seventeen years old, and clearly in a very early developmental stage." (Sylvan). Ravers continue to share experiences that describe a spiritual journey.

Something magical happens to me during those twilight hours on Sunday morning. The music thunders through my flesh, the notes swim within my veins. DJs spin their scriptures with eloquence, zest and assurance. The bass rattles my lungs and beats in unison with my heart. If I close my eyes I can watch my flesh melt away and my soul rise between the spaces of the sound. (St. John 168)

While those who are on the outside looking in may continue to judge the rave culture as yet another drug induced party scene, those who have taken the time to get to know the people, rituals and experience of a rave, will understand that the rave culture has the opportunity to capture a generation of young people disillusioned by traditional religions with a cultural experience that can be transformative. As religious studies professor and author, Charles H.

Long notes, "Religion is thus understood to be persuasive not only in religious institutions, but in all dimensions of cultural life."

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