

The Bee Men of Tassili

by Michael Miley

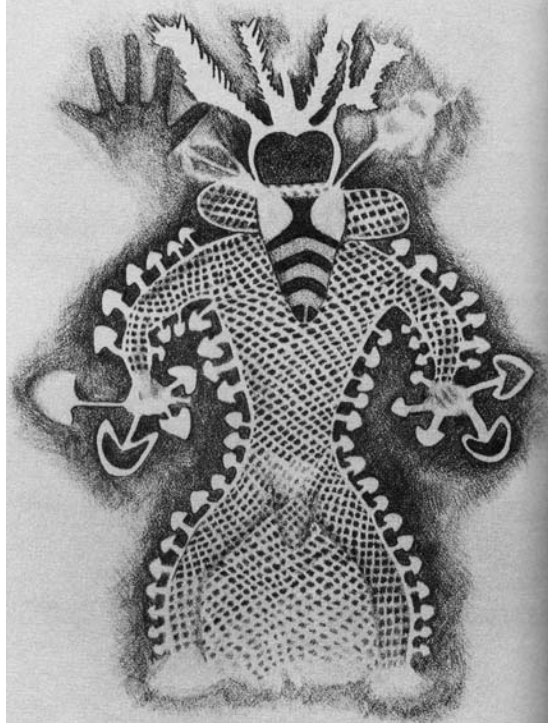


Figure 1. The bee-faced mushroom shaman of Tassili-n-Ajjer.

It was a beautiful summer cottage in Occidental, nestled quietly at the edge of a Redwood grove, a two-bedroom structure erected in the 60s, with all the woodsy style of the era, owned by Bea's friend Alan. Alan would often let her use it when he was away and he'd gone to South America for a month, so we'd driven up from Oakland to spend the weekend there. I took immediate pleasure in the place, which was odd-shaped but lovely, with a long comfortable porch that looked out onto a field of tall grass.

Inside, it was paneled by a warm ubiquitous hardwood, sporting a high vaulted ceiling and a sunroof in the terrarium, as well as a well-appointed country kitchen with ample counters and cupboards. For me, the most striking objects in the house were the beautiful handwoven wastebaskets scattered here and there in the halls and bedrooms, lovely but uncanny things that looked like beehives, as if some insect intelligence had fashioned them – a bit of a portent, as you'll soon see.

We'd come to spend a weekend in the country, but mainly to eat some magic mushrooms in the privacy of the cottage. Bea had gotten them from her son, who had a contact who grew them as a business. He'd gotten us quite a few, enough for a journey that would last from early Saturday evening into the dawn on Sunday morning.

Friday night we just settled in and got used to the place. We made dinner and then lay around talking and listening to music. Though I'd been going out with Bea for several months, we were still in the phase of getting to know one another. She'd gotten over her initial reservations about being involved with a younger man nine years her junior. I was still in the first flush of infatuation with her dark Cuban looks and flamboyant personality. She was an old radical from the 60s, influenced by Marx and the Vietnam antiwar movement, but she'd also studied Foucault and his work on political power and the modern prison system, which was the theme of her dissertation for her PhD in

Criminology. We shared a deep suspicion of authoritarian politics and she liked the fact that I'd been a political activist in Chicago, working in the Central American solidarity movement. Because my politics were like hers, I think it went down easier when I confessed that in the late 80's I'd gotten deeply interested in the UFO phenomenon, which is about as strange as anything gets. But she was a rationalist. I don't know how she felt about flying discs, but she put down people's memories of alien abduction to false memory syndrome and largely dismissed it, though it also frightened her. I took note of this equivocation. In her childhood, she'd had an odd dream of a wolf at the window in the middle of the night that seemed impossible given the height of the house and its location in the South Bay; and once, when we'd watched a video on UFOs and alien abductions she'd gotten terrified and asked me to turn it off. In the end, however, we shared an interest in psychedelics – which brought us up to Occidental.

In my mind, I'd somehow fused the two phenomena – psychedelics and UFOs – with the aid of Terence McKenna's writings, where *Stropharia cubensis*, the psychedelic mushroom – alongside *dimethyltryptamine* (DMT), the active ingredient in *Ayahuasca*, or *Banisteriopsis caapi*, the vision vine of the Amazon basin – were seen as biochemical transducers of extraterrestrial intelligences that were galactic in origin but now present on the planet and had been, in the case of the mushroom, for at least 12,000 years – or for as long as cattle had been domesticated by human beings, since the mushroom often grew from cattle spoor. In McKenna's view, the cosmically resilient spores of the psilocybin mushroom had descended from interstellar space. The evidence for this was that *psilocin*, which is what psilocybin becomes as it enters your metabolism, is 4-hydroxy dimethyltryptamine, the only 4-substituted indole in all of organic nature, a signature that says "I am artificial; I come from outside." In McKenna's psychedelic mythology, which he believed, as he said, "to be true enough," these mushroom spores acted as biological transceivers for the communications of a distant alien species, out there somewhere in the galaxy. As engineered biological communication devices, they were sent out to drift until they found a planet with life and could grow. Earth was a good candidate and so they'd planted themselves here, just waiting for some mammal to come along and eat them so they could activate and begin their transmissions. Then, like a homing beacon, it's as if they called out "We're here! We're here! Come and find us!"

But McKenna's connection of extraterrestrials with mushrooms was even deeper and more intimate than that. McKenna had his own experience of a UFO back in the early 70s while eating psilocybin mushrooms with his brother and their girlfriends in La Chorrera, a small settlement along the Rio Putumayo in the Colombian Amazon. After a long crazy night of eating the 'shrooms, during which time his brother Dennis had gone into a long fugue, believing he was in contact with his dead mother who'd phoned him from the 1950s, Terence separated from the group and went for a walk in the jungle, only to find himself standing next to a lake in the preternatural dawn. While watching the sunrise, Terence stood transfixed as a lenticular cloud slowly transformed itself into a UFO, only to watch it fly overhead with tremendous speed, so low that he thought

he'd be taken. Instead, it passed him over, but low enough for him to see the rivets on its underbelly and to find himself astonished by the odd, ironic fact that the UFO had taken the exact shape of one the saucers of George Adamski, an early 50s contactee, which Terence had long believed to be a photographic hoax.

This vision, along with the mushroom, changed McKenna's life. Terence came to see the UFO as a vision of the future, somehow linked to the collective unconscious of Carl Jung, but really more like the imaginal, Kabbalistic vehicle of the Eschaton, the Omega Point at end of Time, a kind of psychedelic sister to the eschatological visions of the maverick Catholic priest and paleontologist Teilhard de Chardin, whose second coming of Christ was not a physical return of the Jewish prophet, as the all-too literal Christian fundamentalists would have it, but a mystical conflagration at the end of history, when the physical world was transmuted in the hearts and minds of men and women by the hyperspatial light of God. As such, the mushroom was really the harbinger of the End Time, the giver of apocalyptic visions, even as it was also the interstellar transducer of an extraterrestrial Voice that communicates telepathically through a lowly toadstool planted here eons ago, a Voice that often masquerades as God or the Angel in the Middle Eastern religions. This Voice has spent some 30,000 years, perhaps far longer, educating a poor lowly hominid, wherever the ape man ate the sacred mushroom. The Voice's main job was to bootstrap the creature's intelligence, bringing forth the use of language by a channeling process, which wove the necessary synaptic complexity needed in the hominid brain to articulate something more than grunts and groans. McKenna himself channeled this voice in a delirious *glossalalia*. In short, Adam and Even indeed walked naked in the Garden at the dawn of Time, but the fruit of the knowledge of good and evil, of god and devil, was an extraterrestrial mushroom, not an apple, and the Logos they heard came from the depths of their own minds as they chanced to eat it.

And it turns out, this intelligence (though perhaps I misunderstood McKenna) was also that of a kind of insect, as evidenced in the ancient shamanic rock paintings you could find on the Tassili plateaus of Southern Algeria, in the Sahara desert, where you could see shamans running through the convoluted stone corridors of the escarpments as if through a labyrinth or the folds and runnels of a geologic brain, with mushrooms sprouting from their bodies and alarming bee-like heads and torsos. The bee-heads may have been magical headdresses, but more likely they were the visionary self-image of the shaman when he ate the magic mushroom.

All these musings and more were latent seeds in my memory that weekend in Occidental, seeds tucked away in the dark, just waiting to sprout under the magical waters of the psilocybin mushrooms. By that time, of course, I'd also been exposed to the more conventional literature of ufology and to the strange, unearthly tales that involved the abductions of hapless men and women by small gray beings in hovering UFOs – an event that I'd come to believe was essentially like a house call by the dutiful planetary doctor, who'd dropped in to check up on us, to find out how we were coming

along. Unfortunately, we're not doing so well, we've gone down this mechanistic *cul de sac*, and we're in danger of destroying ourselves and every living thing on the planet because of our deluded Biblically-justified dreams of world mastery, so they decided it was up to them to boost our evolutionary possibilities by mixing their genes with us and by tampering with our mental structures so that we can take the next quantum leap and realize that we can create other realities for ourselves among the infinitely pliable alchemical substance we call *matter*. Since we'll never do it from *without*, despite our technological prowess (in fact, *because* of it), we'll have to do it from *within*.

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And so, when Saturday night arrived, we decided to skip dinner and just stir up our mushroom brew. Mushrooms have a foul taste and can upset your stomach, so we ground them up and mixed them with yogurt and berries and then ate them quickly with a spoon, washing them down with juice, and waited for the results. Bea lay down on the couch in the living room and I sat across from her on a second couch near the music system. I think we put on some quiet music, but I can't be sure.

It didn't take long for the mushrooms to act. I was very familiar with the tactile and visual filigrees of psychedelics, with the fractal, prismatic distortions in the visual field, with the way they make all things swell and come alive, so that you feel you're in the belly of some warm and graceful Great Blue Whale as he meanders through the Milky Way. The physical world grows more vivid and personal, at the same time that it becomes less fixed or solid, more like an exquisite fluid dance of waves on the effervescent quantum sea. At one point, however, as I sat there on the couch taking in the breathing wood, our little cottage seemed to grow somewhat ontologically thin and I suddenly had the distinct impression that two nearly invisible beings had quickly dropped through the roof onto the floor, about six feet away from me, near the tiles of the open kitchen. In fact, I thought I could actually hear the thump of their feet on the floor as they landed, as if they had both mass and volume, and I could also sense their presence and felt they stood about three and a half feet tall. I surmised them to be the small thin grays with the big eyes that everyone claims to have seen – though I couldn't actually see them. Just as I was dismissing the perception and thinking "I must be imagining things," one of them apparently walked over to me and pressed his fingers into the side of my leg, as if to declare the reality of his presence. I could feel two long bony fingers making a strong depression in the skin of my thigh. I thought, "Ok, I guess they're really here, in which case, I can get really upset, which would be totally uncool and freak out poor Bea, or I can simply let them stand there and watch, which is all they really came to do." This last bit was a piece of ufological lore. I'd been told by others in the UFO field that aliens are rather eager, if naïve, galactic voyeurs, with a natural curiosity about human sex, about the bonding rituals between men and women and the emotional fireworks we're so prone to, but I also knew that if I mentioned anything to Bea about their presence there in the parlor, she'd run out of the cottage shrieking and

we'd have a bad scene upon our hands. So I said nothing to her about their presence and simply accepted that all would be well if I just let them stand there and watch.

After a time, our physical separation on the two couches began to bother her, so she asked me to come join her on her and I did. Needless to say, I'd perhaps grown a bit tense by the presence of my invisible friends, a tension that she could perceive but not discern the reasons for, and so I think she simply wanted to be loving and helpful, to calm me down. When I came to her couch, I lay down on my back and she curled her leg over me as she unbuttoned my shirt. It was friendly and erotic. Then she said "Focus on your chest as I give you a massage and let yourself go into the feeling and just trust me." She then proceeded to massage my chest around the solar plexus. In my heightened state, this itself was a cause for anxiety, as I felt as if she were actually reaching into my chest and massaging my heart. So I started to breathe deeply, using a kind of yogic breath from the belly, and as I let go of my tension, my heart began to blossom under her touch, opening like a lotus from within, and with each passing moment, I grew more and more ecstatic. At some point, I grew so relaxed I left my body and began drifting toward the ceiling.

Without quite knowing how it happened, I suddenly found myself outside, somewhere in mid air, floating in the translucent "receiving area" of an invisible, visionary UFO that was hovering above our cottage. I say visionary, because it was all very dreamlike, as if I were in two places at once: I was down in the cottage and yet standing in the UFO at the same time. Sitting before me in this undisclosed space was a small gray being with huge almond-shaped eyes who thrust his face into mine in a friendly way, acting for all the world as if he knew me intimately. Telepathically, he asked me a simple question, in a plucky, cheerful manner: "How are you doing?" as if he were genuinely concerned, just like any family member might be about some whacked-out sibling. "I'm doing just fine!" I replied, equally telepathically. "In fact, I'm feeling really fantastic!" "That's all I wanted to know," said the being, and our visit ended as quickly as it began as I promptly drifted back down into the parlor of the cottage below.

As I did so, I was struck by an uncanny sense of dual identity. On the one hand, I felt as if I was an insect just coming out of his cocoon – more precisely, as a large cicada about six feet long – and that I was drying my wings after eighteen years of being buried in the ground, fluttering them back and forth to let the air stiffen them. I saw myself, in fact, as an extraterrestrial insect intelligence that had taken on the mantle of a fleshy hominid in order to understand what it felt like to be a human *from the inside out*. On the other hand, I couldn't be sure that I wasn't really a human mammal temporarily taking on the mantle of an insect, to find out, in turn, what it was like to *be* this alien intelligence from the inside out. In the midst of this perception of dual identity, as I floated in this bubble of visionary chrysalis above the two human forms entwined there on the couch, I suddenly remembered the rock paintings of the Tassili plateau, along with the crazy speculations of Terence McKenna, and I now realized the meaning of my incredible state: I was inwardly touching the ancient sacred archetype of the

mushroomed bee-men of the Tassili Plateau. Though I wasn't a bee, I was certainly an insect, a living exemplar of the visionary experience of dual insect/hominid identity that had been recorded by shamans on the rocks of southern Algeria thousands of years ago. In short, the whole damn thing was just an extraterrestrial game of hide and seek. I was a galactic insect pretending to be a Earth man – or was I a man imagining myself to be an insect?

When I finally descended from the ceiling and returned to my body, Bea had stopped massaging my chest and was cuddled up against me on the couch. The whole out-of-body event had perhaps taken five or ten minutes. I thanked her for relaxing me so profoundly, but I was feeling a bit speechless, to say the least, and so told her little of what I had seen. I think I just said that I'd gone out of my body and that I'd had some strange and beautiful visions of insects, which probably sounded a bit creepy to her. But as I looked around the room, I also had a sense that our two invisible visitors had left.

We spent the rest of the night on that couch, and on into Sunday, relaxing and recuperating, kissing and hugging, sleeping and waking, eating a little and talking quietly with one another. In the afternoon, I think we went for a walk in the woods and saw deer roaming the hillsides. It was a perfectly ordinary Sunday afternoon. I can't remember precisely what we did on Sunday night. No doubt, we cleaned the house and packed our clothes. On Monday morning we made love, in a kind of dreamy way, as if we were still experimenting with one another, still trying to figure out just what it felt like to be a human from the inside out.

When we were done, we showered, gathered our bags, locked up the cottage, and got in the car and drove back home. ~~~

Sonoma, California - 2005.

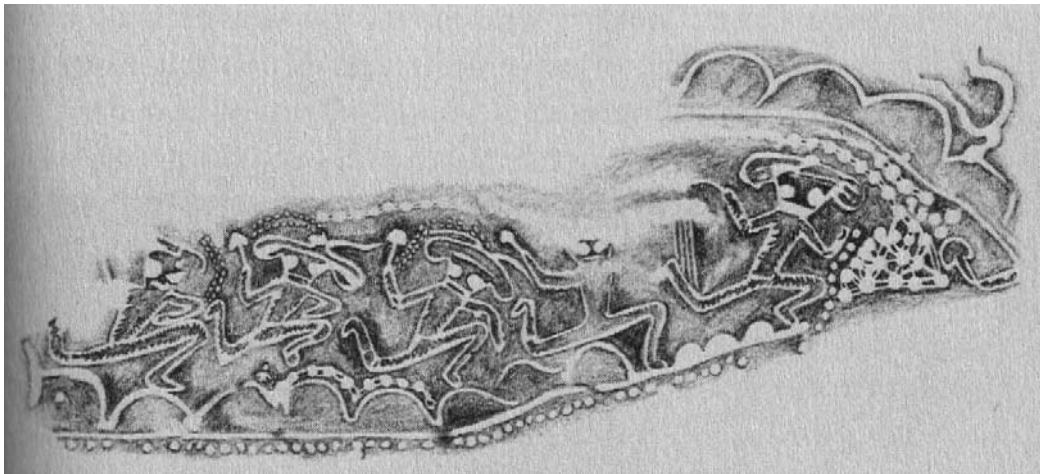


Figure 2. Mushroom runners from Tassili.

Both images are scanned from Terence McKenna's book *Food of the Gods*, Bantam Books, 1992, pp. 72-73. Drawings by Kat Harrison-McKenna. From O.T. Oss and O.N. Oeric, *Psilocybin: The Magic Mushroom Grower's Guide*, 1986, p. 6. From the original in Jean-Dominique Lajoux, *The Rock Paintings of the Tassili*, 1963, pp. 71, 72-73.