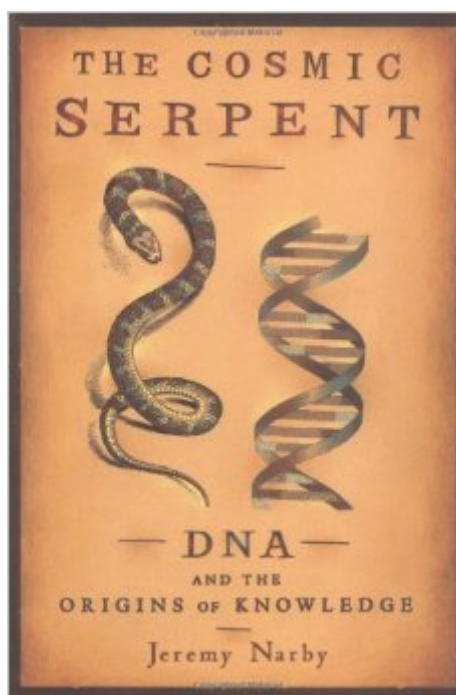


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The Cosmic Serpent: DNA And The Origins Of Knowledge



Synopsis

This adventure in science and imagination, which the Medical Tribune said might herald "a Copernican revolution for the life sciences," leads the reader through unexplored jungles and uncharted aspects of mind to the heart of knowledge. In a first-person narrative of scientific discovery that opens new perspectives on biology, anthropology, and the limits of rationalism, The Cosmic Serpent reveals how startlingly different the world around us appears when we open our minds to it.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Jeremy Narby's argument is that when shaman's drink hallucinogenic brews, their consciousness sinks to the molecular level, and literally communicates with DNA, the basic building block of life. DNA appears to shamans, and others who drink these magic brews, as serpents. This is why, Narby claims, serpents loom large in ancient cultures around the world. It is also how shamans get their expert knowledge of plants. When shamans say that the spirit in the plants tell them how to concoct life-saving remedies, they mean what they say. In hallucinogenic trances, the plants speak. Narby goes onto to speculate that the world is one vast communication network among strands of DNA. You don't have to buy the DNA-communication theory to enjoy this book. It is written in an engaging, personal, first person narrative style. It shows how science works, how "eureka moments" occur when one is relaxed and thinking about other things. Maybe his theory is totally off-base, but even so, big ideas like this one often spur research in different, interesting directions. We are only

as good as our questions, and Narby's question is a great one: What if the shamans are right?

Very interesting book. Anthropologists tend to project their own world views on the people they "observe." This book, which is basically a "story" - demonstrates how one Anthropologist, through his experiences in South America, has his own LAE (life altering experience) which enables him to examine his OWN culture...and its assumptions/metaphors. As a "Native" person, who went through the "mainstream" education system and wrestled with the hubris and fragmentation (let's dissect everything!)...it was a pleasant breath of four winds' air to see him face up to his own field's shortcomings. I recommend the book.

Author, Jeremy Narby leaps between science and mysticism on his quest to explain how several millennia ago Stone-Age hunters living in the Peruvian rainforest learned the botanical properties and the chemistry of plants. Dr. Narby, a Canadian-born scientist, lived two years with the Ashaninka people in the jungles of the Pichis Valley in Peru. Early in his work with the Ashaninka, Dr Narby perceived an enigma. He writes, "These extremely practical and frank people, living almost autonomously in the rain forest, insisted that their extensive botanical knowledge came from plant-induced hallucinations." For Dr. Narby, the hallucinatory origin of botany contradicts two fundamental principles of Western knowledge. First hallucinations cannot be the source of real information, because to consider them as such is the definition of psychosis. Western knowledge considers hallucinations to be at best illusions, at worst morbid phenomena. Second plants do not communicate like human beings. Scientific theories of communication consider that only human beings use abstract symbols like words and pictures and that plants do not relay information in the form of mental images. Dr. Narby said that he often asked Carlos (interpreter) to explain the origin of place names, and Carlos would invariably reply that nature itself had communicated them to the shaman during their hallucinations. Throughout Western times people drink ayahuasca. (hallucinogenic drug) Carlos said, "That is how nature talks, because in nature, there is God, and God talks to us in our visions. When a shaman drinks his plant brew, the spirits present themselves to him and explain everything." Narby observes that in the jungles of Peru are people without electron microscopes who seem to know about the molecular properties of plants and the art of combining them, and when one asks them how they know these things, they say their knowledge comes directly from hallucinogenic plants, themselves. He says, "I was staggered by their familiarity with a reality that turned me upside down and of which I was totally ignorant." For example, hunters in the rain forests developed a muscle-paralyzing substance, curare, as a blow-gun poison. He explains

that in the case of curare, a chance discovery seems improbable because... "there are forty types of curares in the , made from seventy plant species. The kind used in modern medicine comes from the Western . To produce it, it is necessary to combine several plants and boil them for seventy-two hours, while avoiding the fragrant but deadly vapors emitted by the broth. The final product is a paste that is inactive unless injected under the skin. If swallowed, it has no effect." Narby experienced two drug-induced hallucinations the memories of which motivated him ten years later (when the hot-topic, ethno-biology, was highlighted at the Rio Earth Conference), to develop the hypotheses explored in *The Cosmic Serpent*: Plants reveal their own properties Indians get molecularly verifiable information from drug-induced hallucinations. His research propels him along a most intricate and twisted path, and one that will fascinate readers who appreciate science as well as those of us who read about spirituality and the occult. Dr. Narby finds that shamans insist with disarming consistency the world over on the existence of animate essences (or spirits,) which are common to all life forms. The interpreter, Carlos, referred to invisible beings, called maninkari, who are found in animals, plants, mountains, streams, lakes, and certain crystals, and who are sources of knowledge. The spirits materialize when the shaman ingests tobacco and ayahuasca. Aboriginal shamans of Australia reach conclusions similar to those of ian shamans, without the use of psychoactive plants, by working mainly with their dreams. Dr. Narby doggedly pursues the facts although the research takes him into areas that science hesitates to explore. Areas, he calls "blind spots." He gathers evidence to conclude that shamans know about the hidden unity of nature precisely because they have access to the reality of molecular biology! I hope to tweak your curiosity with the following intriguing phrases lifted from the text of *The Cosmic Serpent*: I know that any living soul, or any dead one, is like radio waves flying around in the air. That means that you do not see them, but they are there, like radio waves. Once you turn on the radio, you can pick them up.. The Shaman is simply a guide, who conducts the initiate to the spirits. The initiate picks up the information revealed by the spirits and does what he or she wants with it. Rationalism separates things to understand them. But its fragmented disciplines have limited perspectives and blind spots. And as any driver knows, it is important to pay attention to blind spots, because they can contain vital information. To reach a fuller understanding of reality, science will have to shift its gaze. Could shamanism help science to focus differently? True reality is more complex than our eyes lead us to believe. This is perhaps one of the most important things I learned during this investigation: We see what we believe, and not just the contrary; and to change what we see, it is sometimes necessary to change what we believe. Shamans every where speak a secret language, the language of all nature which allows them to communicate with the spirits.

This is a very interesting story by an author with great credentials who seems very sincere. However, his argument that indigenous people truly understood the structure of DNA and gained this knowledge from what the plants told them was not convincing. There were some interesting connections, but I found that Mr. Narby tended to read a lot into his findings. At certain points, I was even annoyed by the leaps in logic and hasty conclusions. On a more positive note, the story itself is interesting and underlying concept for the book intriguing and thought provoking. When I shifted gears to thinking of this as very speculative and following it like fiction I found it more interesting. While I believe the author was sincere in his attempt to rely the facts, I think he got very caught up in his theory and tended to see proof for it where in fact the evidence was less than certain. This book is certainly not a scientific treatise. It is a good story that raises some interesting issues about shamanism and the validity of information gained from altered states of consciousness. It raises interesting epistemological questions and certainly entertains, but I found it to be light in terms of making a good arguments for the central premise of the book.

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