



ALTERED STATES OF CONSCIOUSNESS

Two-Culture Comparison

Adapted from [eHRAF Teaching Exercise 1.26 Level 1, Question 2](#), by Jack Dunnington, Carol Ember and Erik Ringen.



EXERCISE SUMMARY

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In this exercise you will gain experience interpreting ethnographic case reports addressing altered states of consciousness in two societies, and situating these within ethnographic trance typologies.

The state oracle - in a trance headed to report to the Dalai Lama. Christopher Michael 2014: CC 2.0 via Wikimedia Commons

EXERCISE DETAILS

TIME: 20-30 minutes

MATERIALS REQUIRED:

- HRAF Access
- Worksheet and pen or other materials for recording answers

STUDENT LEARNING OUTCOMES:

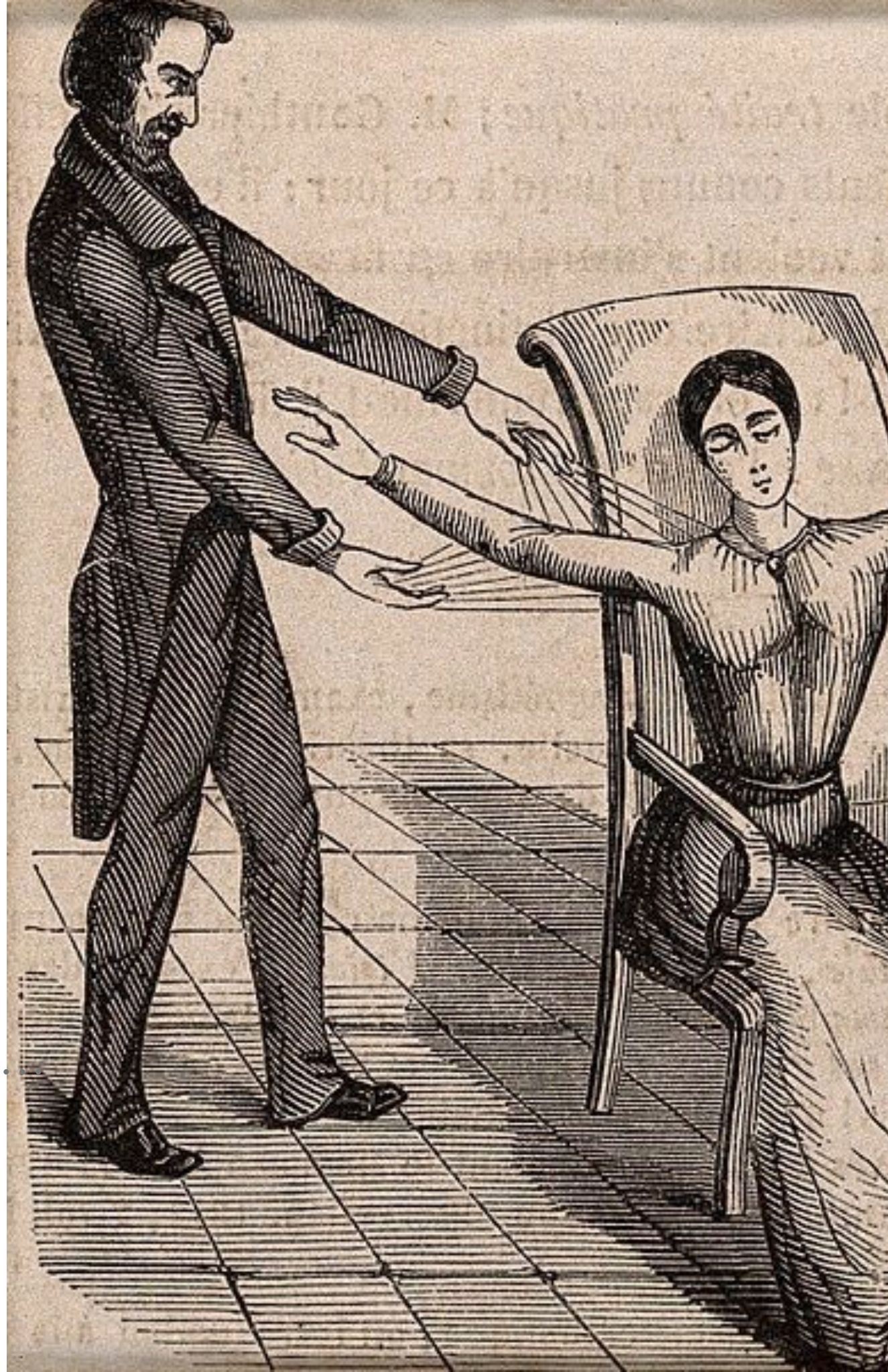
At the end of this Exercise, students will be able to:

- Describe and summarize differences in altered states of consciousness across Central Asia
- Construct effective and efficient search strategies in eHRAF in order to retrieve data relevant to a specific topic/assignment.

We are all aware that our dreams may contain very different kinds of thoughts than those that we have while awake. Humans can also experience altered states of consciousness in wakeful moments.

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A medical practitioner trained in mesmerism, a type of hypnosis, using the Animal Magnetism technique on a woman who responds with convulsions . Wood engraving. Mesmer, Franz Anton 1734-1815. Wellcome Images CC 4.0 via Wikimedia Commons





STRANGE EVENT— OR NATURAL LIFE PROCESS?

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In contemporary North American culture, these wakeful ASCs are thought of either as unusual events or pertaining to practices of specialists—hypnotic states induced by therapists or magicians, trances entered into by mediums conducting séances, meditation in yoga classes, or drug-induced hypnotic states.

The medium Eiener Nielsen (back), who claimed to channel the dead, allowing them to speak to and touch the living. Hans Gerloff 1954. Public Domain Image via Wikimedia Commons.

The idea that bodies might be possessed by demons, witches, or spirits also exists as a popular theme in media and in some religious traditions.

ETHNOGRAPHIC EXPLANATIONS

An image of a witch within a French book from the 1600's: "A witch at her cauldron surrounded by beasts." Etching by J. van de Velde II, 1626.

Wellcome Images CC 4.0 via Wikimedia Commons.



ANCIENT HISTORY OF ALTERED STATES

Altered states of consciousness have likely been part of the cognitive repertoire for at least 100,000 years, if not longer.

- *Art composed of motifs indicating sensory deprivation and commonly-associated forms of visual hallucination can be seen as early as 70,000-100,000 years ago at Blombos Cave in South Africa.*
- *Archaeological evidence for institutionalized altered states of consciousness has been found in human societies across the globe and throughout human history.*

*Pre-Columbian Maya
society members ritually
consumed balché, a mead-
like drink made with the
hallucinogenic plant
Lonchocarpus longistylus.*

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*The flowering lonchocarpus longistylus, used by Maya to
make Balche, a mildly intoxicating drink. Photo by Liliana
Usvat 2013.*





OLMEC

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The Olmec used “hallucinogens such as native tobacco (*Nicotiana rustica*) or the psychoactive venom found in the parathyroid gland of the marine toad *Bufus marinus*. Bones of this totally inedible toad appeared in trash deposits at San Lorenzo

Nicotiana rustica - Botanical Garden Bremen. 2009.
Tubifex CC-by-SA 3.0 via Wikimedia Commons.

While the magnificent kneeling figure known as the ‘Princeton Shaman’ has one of these amphibians incised on the top of his head (Diehl 2004, 106; Sharer and Morley 1992).

*The “Princeton Shaman”: Shaman in Transformation Pose, Olmec, ca. 800 B.C. An image of the marine toad *Bufus marinus* is incised on the figure’s forehead.*





Iron Age Indo-European groups such as the Scythians and the Dacians utilized *Cannabis sativa* and melilot (*Melilotus* sp.), which have been found charred in vessels and pouches accompanying burials and were described by the Greek historian Herodotus (5th century BCE) as part of spiritual purification (Rudenko and Thompson 1970; Rolle and Walls 1989).

Hemp plant. A flowering male and B seed-bearing female plant, actual size. From Franz Eugen Köhler's Medizinal-Pflanzen. Published and copyrighted by Gera-Untermhaus, FE Köhler in 1887 (1883–1914). Public Domain Image via Wikimedia Commons





Irish passage tombs or dolmen such as the site of Knowth, County Meath, are likely to have been designed as “multisensorial experiences” in which darkness and acoustic resonance could produce altered states of consciousness (Twohig 1981; Watson 2001; Wesler 2012; Lewis-Williams and Dowson 1993)

Image of Eastern Passage, Knowth, Ireland, where cavernous hallways and rooms are thought to have been used by ancient people's to induce altered states of consciousness. Photo By Przemysław Sakrajda CC BY-SA 3.0 via Wikimedia Commons

TRANCE

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These examples represent only a small fraction of the historical and archaeological evidence for institutionalized altered states of consciousness. As the scope of archaeological evidence is limited by materiality, these pharmacologically-oriented examples represent only a few of the ways that humans engage in wakeful altered states of consciousness.

Image of a hybrid human-elephant figure with pierced penis from South Africa. Photo by Nebiyu.S "Altered States Depiction." 2015. Photograph of an exhibit at Origins Centre, Wits University, South Africa. CC-BY-4.0 via Wikimedia Commons.

VARIATION

Nearly all societies are known to engage in practices that lead to altered states of consciousness.

However the methods, functions, and cultural context vary widely between societies.

One major variation that has been studied is whether societies believe in possession by spirits or in one's soul fleeing or going on a journey.

The Sanghyang dance is a sacred dance performed by two young girls. During this dance, it is believed that a force enters the body of an entranced performer and takes over her movements. Photo of Sang Hyang Dans by Tropenmuseum, part of the National Museum of World Cultures CC BY-SA 3.0 via Wikimedia Commons



DIFFERENT TYPES OF ALTERED STATES

Using “ADVANCED Search” in eHRAF, explore the subject categories (OCMs)—Revelation and Divination or Ecstatic Religious Practices in the following societies:

- Chipewyan of North America
- Central Thai of Asia.

**For step-by-step video directions for conducting an Advanced Search in eHRAF World Cultures, [click here](#).

QUESTIONS ON CHIPPEWA AND CENTRAL THAI

1. What different types of altered states do you see described among these two groups? Compare and contrast them.
2. What similarities do you note among trances experiences between these?
3. Do you notice any similarities between these trance experiences and religious or ecstatic experiences you have been exposed to in your life? Describe.



Balinese Legong Dancers 1953.P. (Paul) Spies . TropenMuseum, part of the National Museum of World Cultures. CC by SA 3.0 via Wikimedia Commons

RESOURCES

Assignment Rubric, Tips, References



RUBRIC

➤ The following rubric is suggested for evaluating responses:

	Unsatisfactory (0%)	Needs Improvement (25%)	Satisfactory (75%)	Outstanding (10 points)
		<i>Needs Improvement</i>	<i>Satisfactory</i>	<i>Outstanding</i>
Content Development	<i>Unsatisfactory</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none">➤ Content on two societies is incomplete.➤ Major points are not clear.➤ Specific examples are not used.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">➤ Commentary on research findings is not comprehensive and /or persuasive.➤ Major points are addressed, but not well supported.➤ Responses are inadequate or do not address topic or response to the questions➤ Specific examples do not support topic or response to the questions.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">➤ Evaluation and analysis of research findings is accurate. Major points are stated.➤ Responses are adequate and address the question at hand.➤ Content is accurate➤ A specific example from the research is used.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">➤ Evaluation and analysis of research findings is accurate and persuasive.➤ Major points are stated clearly and are well supported.➤ Responses are excellent and address questions➤ Content is clear.➤ Several specific examples from the research are used.

EXPLORE MORE

- For more exercises and teaching resources related to human societies past and present, explore [*Teaching eHRAF*](#)
- For a more detailed version of this particular exercise with additional questions and activities check out [*eHRAF Teaching Exercises 1.26 Altered States of Consciousness*](#) by Jack Dunnington, Carol R. Ember, and Erik Ringen.
- For more information on altered states of consciousness, check out the [*“Altered States of Consciousness”*](#) module by Carol Ember and Christina Carolus in HRAF’s Explaining Human Culture database.

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