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The Sacred Narcotic Lily of the Nile: Nymphaea caerulea

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THE SACRED NARCOTIC LILY OF THE
NYMPHAEA CAERULEA

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A suggestion that certain water lilies might have narcot
in their frequent use as a motif in funerary art among the
Mayans. The work of Rands (1953, 1955) traced the New
water lily motifs throughout Mayan art and made importan
From the middle of the Classical period until the inception o
the water lily motif is extremely common and highly varie
Rands makes the association between this tradition and th

Although Conard, in his 1905 monograph on the wate
importance of *Nymphaea caerulea* Sav. (Fig. 1) in a deco
atic sense, he cannot attribute any mythic associations o
and does not mention the possibility of water lily cults.
assertions of earlier writers that the Nymphaeaceae have ar
or unusual chemical properties. This represents the curr
among most ethnobotanists, pharmacologists, and anthrop

In extending the earlier works of Rands, Dobkin de Rio
gated the psychotropic flora and fauna in Mayan culture a
use of the water lily motif in association with the toad (
toads contain bufotenine in glands located near the tympar
released in the matrix of a milky exudate when the amphil
tenine is capable of inducing profound hallucinations afte
brain barrier. This led Dobkin de Rios to the assertion tha
the water lily were probably more than decorative and co
the development of a belief system that could be explaine
of the toad and the water lily to alter states of conscious
met with some hostile reactions from anthropologists, who
approach inadequate, even in light of the amassed evidenc

Emboden (1974) touched upon the use of *Nymphaea c*
and has been in contact with Dobkin de Rios concerning th
flower as a narcotic. This paper explores the use of wate
the old world and especially in ancient Egypt. In a future p
Dobkin de Rios we will treat transcultural phenomena rela
cotic water lilies in a comprehensive manner.

Of the several Mayan sites in which water lily motifs hav

the most dramatic are the murals at Bonampak, which ar
Egyptian murals that the similarity is startling. The associ
with the sensory modes pointed out by Rands (1953) is st
one of the principal Bonampak murals, which I have seen
Peabody Museum of Harvard University, there is depicted
water lilies are associated with the noses and foreheads of
Percussion instruments are played and many of the dancers
are being blown as this unexplained ceremony takes place.
mented on these depictions and supports the contention t
used as a ritual narcotic. He quotes from poetry of a ritua
of hymn to the "precious aquatic flowers" and the "flowe
the beautiful narcotic flowers." The Nahuatl term *quetza*

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