# Where East Meets West in Harmony: an Interdisciplinary Approach to Aldous Huxley's *Island*

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Aldous Huxley's last novel, the utopia *Island*, published in 1962, is the writer's swansong and a literary testament in which he refutes the pessimistic vision of his famous dystopia, *Brave New World* (1932). The novel reflects Huxley's philosophical and spiritual view of life towards the end of his life, after a constant and diligent search for meaning and for solutions to the challenges humanity faces in modern times. This time, the central message of the novel is that humanity might be capable of creating the ideal society, in which people can live in peace and harmony. The novel presents the conclusions Huxley reached after a lifetime of research into how the discoveries of science, together with religion and philosophy could be used creatively to build a world where science and spirituality come together harmoniously, and the purpose of man's quest is achieving happiness by understanding the ultimate goal of life.

Pala is a small fictional island in the Pacific Ocean where an ideal society founded by a buddhist king (Raja) and a Scottish physician flourished a hundred and twenty years ago. It is a "New Age" world in which Western scientific progress blends with Eastern spiritual traditions, and where science, art and education all contribute to the creation of a harmonious society. Human nature is ameliorated by education, which, like the health care system, brings together what is best in the East and West (Izzo 2005). Pala's inhabitants are up to date with the new discoveries in science and technology and adopt those that would help to improve their existence. However, these amenities do not become goals in life, as it frequently happens in the modern society. Instead, they are tools that serve the supreme goal – attaining happiness through self-knowledge and an understanding of the ultimate reality (Watts 1969).

In contrast to the society imagined in *Brave New World*, where the fictitious drug *soma* was employed for totalitarian purposes to control the population, in *Island* Huxley describes a community who uses psychedelic drugs beneficially. On Pala, the fictional entheogenic mushroom called *moksha* is used in rites of passage.

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Both *soma* and *moksha* are universal drugs. But while in *Brave New World*, *soma* was used as a form of coercion to maintain the stability of that artificially-created world, in *Island*, *moksha*-medicine is used for enlightenment and self-knowledge.

The young Palanese are guided with the help of the psychotropic drug on their spiritual journey to adulthood. They have to climb on top of a mountain, and *moksha* accompanies them on this initiation journey, having the property of increasing the power of the mind. The mountain climbing is a dangerous rite of passage that all young people in Pala must accomplish and which has great spiritual value. This trial is "an ordeal that helps them to understand the world they'll have to live in, helps them to realize the omnipresence of death, the essential precariousness of all existence" (Huxley 1962/1976: 187). The rite is crowned with the revelation coming from experimenting the psychedelic *moksha* in a group ceremony reminiscent of indigenous religious ceremonies in different parts of the world, in which sacred plants with hallucinogenic properties are consumed for mystical purposes:

> But after the ordeal comes the revelation. In a few minutes these boys and girls will be given their first experience of the *moksha*-medicine. They'll all take it together, and there'll be a religious ceremony in the temple. […] Thanks to the *moksha*-medicine, it includes an actual experience of the real thing (*Ibidem*).

Therefore, education on Pala is mainly experiential and the role of the hallucinogen in the initiation rites is that of a vehicle toward self-knowledge and a deep understanding of reality:

> The real thing isn't a proposition; it's a state of being. We don't teach our children creeds or get them worked up over emotionally charged symbols. When it's time for them to learn the deepest truths of religion, we set them to climb a precipice and then give them four hundred milligrams of revelation. Two first-hand experiences of reality, from which any reasonably intelligent boy or girl can derive a very good idea of what's what (*Ibidem*).

The experience facilitated by *moksha*-medicine is liberating and leads to a changed perception of the world springing from increased self-knowledge, which paves the way to happiness:

> Liberation, […] the ending of sorrow, ceasing to be what you ignorantly think you are and becoming what you are in fact. For a little while, thanks to the *moksha*-medicine, you will know what it's like to be what in fact you are, what in fact you always have been. What a timeless bliss! (*Ibidem*: 198-199).

But this experience is not sufficient in itself to transform the one who lives it. The revelations one has during it should afterwards be translated into daily life, and this is where the free will of each individual plays an essential role:

> All that the *moksha*-medicine can do is to give you a succession of beatific glimpses, an hour or two, every now and then, of enlightening and liberating grace. It remains for you to decide whether you'll cooperate with the grace and take those opportunities (*Ibidem*: 199).



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We can find this belief of the author on how the revelations one might have during psychedelic experiences could be be capitalized, in all his writings about visionary experiences.

In *Island*, *moksha*-medicine is compared with prayer, fasting and spiritual exercises, having the same effect as meditation, yet amplified:

> In theological terms, […] the *moksha*-medicine prepares one for the reception of gratuitous graces – pre-mystical visions or the full-blown mystical experience (Huxley 1962/1976: 215).

This higher stage of spiritual insight can be reached through self-knowledge and self-control:

> By cultivating the state of mind that makes it possible for the dazzling ecstatic insights to become permanent and habitual illuminations. By getting to know oneself to the point where one won't be compelled by one's unconscious to do all the ugly, absurd, self-stultifying things that one so often finds oneself doing (*Ibidem*: 216).

Therefore, along with meditation, *moksha*-medicine develops the emotional and existential intelligence – the individual becomes more intelligent:

> not more intelligent in relation to science or logical argument – more intelligent on the deeper level of concrete experiences and personal relationships (*Ibidem*).

The word *moksha* (or *mukti*) comes from Sanskrit and means "liberation". The term generally refers to liberation from all that is "earthly". In Hindu philosophy, the concept is similar to Nirvana, being defined as transcendence of the phenomenal being and of any awareness of time, space and causality (Brodd 2003). *Moksha*-medicine provides its consumers with a unique experience that opens their eyes, and blesses and transforms their life. Consequently, – unlike *soma*, which was consumed daily by the New World inhabitants – *moksha*-medicine is only used on special occasions, in rituals aimed at self-transcendence.

The detailed description, at the end of the novel, of Farnaby's experience of *moksha*-medicine is undoubtedly modeled after the author's first experiment with mescaline in 1953, presented in detail in the book *The Doors of Perception*. We recognize the description of the effects of the imaginary hallucinogen from *Island* to be largely a summary of the author's first mescaline experience. The same main elements can be found in both descriptions, but in a slightly modified context in *Island*: the sequence of revelations, the bright, vivid light, the intense happiness doubled by a deep understanding of things, the self-illumination, the merging of the self with everything around, the reality of eternity, art transfigured, the intensification of colours, compassion, metaphysical fear, Bach music, the hibiscus bush, the furniture in the room (a table, a rocking chair, a library with jewel-like books) which acquire unexpected meanings.

However, unlike the actual experiences the author had with psychedelic drugs and which were invariably positive (Bedford 2002), Farnaby finds out, in the second part of the same experiment, that there is (or might be) a dark side of the hallucinogenic adventure. The fall from "heaven" to "hell" is caused by a strong negative emotion, an inexplicable fear that engulfs him when the hasty movements



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of a lizard pierce the transitory oasis of illuminating happiness that he is enjoying. Thus, Farnaby discovers the fragility of the boundary between the sublime and the grotesque during the hallucinogenic experience, which is something the writer wishes to remind the reader:

> Openness to bliss and understanding was also, he realized, an openness to terror, to total incomprehension. Like some alien creature lodged within his chest and struggling in anguish, his heart started to beat with a vilence that made him tremble. In the hideous certainty that he was about to meet the Essential Horror, Will turned his head and looked (Huxley 1962/1976: 319).

In fact, Susila warned him, before the experiment, about the possibility of having a negative experience:

> The moksha-medicine can take you to heaven; but it can also take you to hell. Or else to both, together or alternately. Or else (if you're lucky, or if you've made yourself ready) beyond either of them. And then beyond the beyond, […] back to business as usual. Only now, of course, business as usual is completely different (*Ibidem*: 307).

We can easily recognize here the effects of mescaline and LSD as described in the essays *The Doors of Perception* and *Heaven and Hell*: the duality of the experience – which can be sublime or terrifying, or a combination of the two opposing states –, its unpredictable nature and the importance of preparation, the possibility of having a visionary experience, and the transformation that occurs as a result of such an experience. The role of the "guide" during the experiment with a hallucinogenic substance is emphasized here, as it was in *The Doors of Perceptions*. Farnaby is supervised and guided by Susila McPhail during his psychedelic adventure and she shows him both the bright side, generating bliss, and the dark and frightening side of the hallucinogen. But she is also the one who sets him free from the grip of the terrifying visions generated by the presence of a lizard and of some insects that appeared to him as monstrous incarnations of evil. Therefore, the "guide" can influence the manner in which the experiment unfolds and has the esential role of preventing its transformation into a nightmare.

*Moksha*-medicine is extracted from a yellow hallucinogenic mushroom that grows in the Palanese mountains, but which is now cultivated in an Experimental Station at high altitude. Murugan – a young man raised in Europe by a bigoted mother, and the future Raja of Pala –, disapprovingly calls it a "scientifically cultivated dope" (Huxley 1962/1976: 158), although there are no addicts in the Palanese community. It is made clear that those are not red-capped mushrooms – like the widespread hallucinogenic mushroom *Amanita muscaria* (Drăgan 2005) – but yellow-coloured mushrooms. They could belong to the Psilocybe family of mushrooms which contain psilocybin, a hallucinogenic alkaloid that Huxley experienced for the first time in 1960 (Horowitz, Palmer 1999).

On the other hand, the amount of *moksha*-medicine which is administered during the Palanese rituals, totalling 400 mg, corresponds rather to an active dose of mescaline (ranging between 200 and 500 mg of mescaline sulphate), than to an active dose of psilocybin, which is of 4-8 mg (Richard, Senon 2005). Therefore, the writer describes the fictional hallucinogenic plant grown on the island of Pala by



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using a combination of elements characteristic of naturally occurring psychedelic substances which are familiar to him and probably known to his readers.

*Moksha*-medicine is undoubtedly a drug, even if it is not named so deliberately, except by Murugan, who refers to it using the pejorative term "dope", which in English refers to an illicit drug. *Soma*, the so-called "ideal" drug of the *Brave New World*, although a panacea, is not named in the novel otherwise than "drug", which in English is an ambiguous word.

In *Island* one can easily note the author's desire to emphasize the innocuous character of the hallucinogenic mushroom due to the manner in which the Palanese use the plant – not for recreation, not individually and not regularly, but under supervision and in a controlled way, during rites of passage. For this message to be as explicit as possible, Huxley chooses to include the word "medicine" in the composition of the name given to the Palanese hallucinogen. As this drug, although called "medicine", is not used therapeutically but for mystical purposes, it is is more likely that Huxley named the psychotropic substance having in mind another, less known meaning of the word "medicine", that of an object which in traditional American Indian is believed to give control over natural or magical forces, or another similar meaning, that of magical power or a magical rite[1].

The importance of how we name things, especially in the case of substances with psychotropic effects, is emphasized by Dr. Robert MacPhail, a central character of the book:

> What's in a name? [...] practically everything. Having had the misfortune to be brought up in Europe, Murugan calls it dope and feels about it all the disapproval that, by conditional reflex, the dirty word evokes. We, on the contrary, give the stuff good names – the *moksha*-medicine, the reality-revealer, the truth-and-beauty pill. And we know, by direct experience, that the good names are deserved (Huxley 1962/1976: 159).

Murugan expresses the view of the sceptic who, based on his Western education and experience, believes – without having any direct personal experience – that the revelations offered by *moksha*-medicine are but misleading illusions and the consumption of any drug is a degrading act: "For him, it's dope and dope is something that, by definition, no decent person ever indulges in" (*Ibidem*). The writer highlights here, on the one hand, the typical preconceptions of the Western world about psychedelic substances, and on the other hand, the importance of direct experience in the assimilation of phenomena or events that are beyond our ordinary power of understanding.

We can find in the novel one of Huxley's favorite themes, which is hypnosis. Will Farnaby – the main character in the novel –, who suffered a knee injury during his shipwreck on the island of Pala, receives a treatment for relieving pain and lowering his fever, based on hypnosis. Susila MacPhail – one of the main characters of the novel – puts Will into trance by speaking to him about a place in his home country, England, and then she gives him some indirect suggestions with an analgesic and antipyretic effect:

[1] According to Merriam-Webster dictionary, http://www.merriam-webster.com.



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> I got him to be conscious of his body image. Then I made him imagine it much bigger than in everyday reality – and the knee much smaller. A miserable little thing in revolt against a huge and splendid thing. There can't be any doubt as to who's going to win (Huxley 1962/1976: 39).

The novel also addresses one of the major themes of *Brave New World*, assisted reproduction, which this time does not take place in ectogenesis – a method that alters the relationship between mother and child – but by artificial insemination, a technique which is closer to natural reproduction. On Pala women have the possibility of choosing this modern method of reproduction, for the genetic diversification of the children they wish to have. On the other hand, the contaceptive pill was adopted with enthusiasm on the island, as it reduces the stress related to sexuality at a young age.

Another favorite theme of Huxley's, with a leading role in the functioning of any society, is education. As Farnaby notes, Palanese education is "heavily biological", with its primary emphasis "not on physics and chemistry", but "on the sciences of life". Children learn about psychology, Mendelism and evolution in a practical way, by playing games like "evolutionary Snakes and Ladders" or "psychological bridge" (*Ibidem*: 246).

The lifestyles adopted by the Palanese is perfectly balanced, combining work with relaxation and intellectual activity with exercise. People enjoy good health, because in this society the focus is on preventive medicine and the health care system is very well developed. However, suffering and death are not absent or denied, as *in Brave New World*, but are accepted as part of human life and Palanese people are educated to face them. People live in small communities, within which many families form "Clubs of mutual adoption", that are beneficial to the education and development of children. They are "conditioned" from a young age – like children in *Brave New World* –, but all the messages that are inculcated into their minds are positive and contribute to their harmonious development. Sexuality is unconventional, but it is closely linked to the spiritual vision of the world. Science and technology, education, psychology, hypnosis, yoga and *moksha*-medicine, are all tools used to ensure a beautiful and balanced life.

The key to the stability and harmony of the Palanese community is that they chose:

> […] the road of applied biology, the road of fertility control and the limited production and selective industrialization which fertility control make possible, the road that leads towards happiness from the inside out, through health, through awareness, through a change in one's attitude towards the world; not towards the mirage of happiness from the outside in, through toys and pills and non-stop distractions (Huxley 1962/1976: 247) –

as happened in *Brave New World*, where a whole industry sustained that artificial happiness designed to keep the population under control.

Other medical elements that can be identified in the novel are preventive medicine and public health. Preventing illness is the main concern of the Palanese healthcare system, unlike the western health system – highlights a nurse working in a hospital in Pala – which, except for sewerage systems and synthetic vitamins does



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not offer anything in the field of prevention. Huxley exposes here the (arguable) lack of prevention in modern medicine, despite the fact that its importance for long-term good health is universally recognized (Basnayake 2004).

In *Island* Huxley transposed into fictional form his view on hallucinogenic drugs and their possible use, in an almost ideal society, for self-transcendence and spiritual development. An important message the author conveys in relation to psychoactive substances – which emerges from Huxley's two utopias and can be found explicitly in his non-fiction writings – is that no existing drug, be it a natural (*moksha*-medicine) or synthetic (*soma*) product is devoid of dangerous or unpleasant side effects. Another important aspect that the writer emphasizes is that when experimenting with hallucinogens, preparation, the environment in which the experiment takes place and the role of the "guide" are equally important in order to reduce the risks of negative experiences.

Although the novel does not have a happy ending – the island is occupied by the capitalists to exploit its oil resources –, this is far from being as pessimistic as some critics consider it. The author's message, explicitly expressed in the novel through the words of a Pala resident is rather optimistic: if the Palanese "found a way of being happily human" (Huxley 1962/1976: 247), there is a slight chance that in the future, this example might be imitated.

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## Where East Meets West in Harmony: an Interdisciplinary Approach to Aldous Huxley's *Island*

When Eastern and Western concepts and practices are brought together to imagine an ideal society where people benefit from the most important advantages of both cultures, they give rise to a hybrid utopia which may seem odd and far-fetched to a Western reader who is not well acquainted with Eastern philosophy. Yet, in his last novel, Huxley creates a society that embodies a philosophy of life resulting from a life-time quest for means of facilitating the progress of humanity, thus shaping what might be called a "realistic utopia". The paper discusses several interdisciplinary aspects in the novel, pertaining principally to science,



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religion and philosophy, many of which revolve around the use of a psychedelic drug in rites of passage by the inhabitants of the fictitious island of Pala. Experiential learning, applied psychology, conventional and complementary medicine all contribute to the stability and unity of the Palanese society. Western scientific progress and Eastern spiritual traditions combine harmoniously to enable Palanese people to pursue the ultimate goal: reaching happiness through self-realization and direct knowledge of the absolute reality.



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