

The Ayahuasca Ceremony as a Viable Treatment Modality

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Introduction

In the history of the human species, ritual, ceremony, and the sacred have manifested themselves in a multitude of forms. Spiritual principles and concepts attempting to illuminate the mysterious nature of existence have been expressed as a vast array of varied and divergent cultural manifestations. In the West, a particular kind of thinking has dominated much of our views concerning what is “real” or worth investigating, one which embraces a kind of egoic separation and distinction of self, or individual, from all else. We have become accustomed towards a means of “knowing” which in many ways disavows spirituality and relegates all experience as explainable by means of physical and concrete processes. We have hailed the gods of science, backed by reason and rationality as the supreme mode of knowing, but at the expense of more profound and less tangible spiritual truths, as Terrence McKenna elucidates, “We have been to the moon, we have charted the depths of the ocean and the heart of the atom, but we have a fear of looking inward to ourselves because we sense that is where all the contradictions flow together” (as cited in *The Unbounded Spirit*, 2014).

The prevailing Western cultural values that humans are separate from, not interconnected with ecosystems, that the sacred is unacknowledged or ignored, and the divine aspect to our world is outside of ourselves thereby unattainable, continues to perpetuate the exploitation of people and the destruction of the natural environment. Preceding Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, Judaism and many other current and former religious practices of humanity, shamanism is arguably one of the world’s most ancient spiritual traditions. With its focus on the sacredness of the natural world and the interconnectedness of all living organisms it is not surprising that this ancient custom is gaining popularity and acceptance amongst many in the West. Some are

turning towards these ancient paths of wisdom in order to lay hold of more esoteric understandings of our world, our relationship to it, to ourselves, and to one another.

The term “shamanism” can be traced to the earth based spiritual traditions of indigenous cultures originating in what is now known as Siberia, likely preceding the human species’ migration across what would have been the Bering land bridge (Harner, 1990). Though there are a number of commonalities that are discernable amongst shamanic traditions, there are also distinctions. The main thread that seems to connect all shamanic practice regardless of culture would undoubtedly be the recognition of separate realities and energies that interact with and affect our being on this physical plane of existence. Another difference between shamanic traditions is the method by which these typically hidden and mysterious worlds are accessed. Shaman gain entry into these veiled realms of consciousness through various means, differing according to cultural and tribal customs. Many cultures utilize monotonous drumming over prolonged periods of time to modify consciousness, others use fasting as a technique to make contact with these dimensions, and still others utilize certain plant mixtures (oftentimes considered sacramental by nature) to travel in these sacred territories (Walsh, 2007).

The purpose of this paper is to explore some of the literature associated with one particular form of shamanism found within the native traditions of Central and South America. More specifically, I will examine the ritually taken sacramental beverage known as ayahuasca that is associated with these traditions. Ayahuasca, which has been utilized shamanically and ceremonially as a means of modifying consciousness for millennia, is considered profoundly sacred and is consumed for the strict purposes of healing and gaining spiritual insight and wisdom (Luna, 2007). Under the masterful care of skilled and trained shaman or within highly organized and institutionalized syncretic religious bodies, this medicine seems to possess an

innate capacity for healing (Luna, 2007). What is this mysterious sacrament? What can it offer to modern day humans and what does the academic literature tell us about the efficacy for healing that the ritualistic use of this plant admixture possesses?

What is Ayahuasca?

It is estimated that there are approximately 20,000 people who drink ayahuasca regularly throughout the world (Cavnar, 2014). It has traditionally been used by over 70 different indigenous groups scattered throughout Brazil, Colombia, Peru, Venezuela, Bolivia, and Ecuador (Santos et al., 2007). There is ample archaeological evidence that supports the premise that ayahuasca has been used by the human species since pre-Columbian times going as far back as 1500-2000 BC (McKenna, 2004). The beverage in its more traditional and basic form is composed of a combination of two types of plant species found in the Amazon basin including the vine *Banisteriopsis Caapi*, also known as hoasca or ayahuasca, and the more bushy plant known as *Psychotria Viridis* or known amongst the native peoples as chacruna (McKenna, 2004). Depending on particular cultural traditions and/or each shaman's particular practice, sometimes additional plants will be added during the preparation process of making ayahuasca, in order to imbue the brew with the spirits or energies of those particular plants (Kilham, 2013).

The drink is considered psychoactive in that it is able to produce strong visionary states. According to Western standards it is labeled as "hallucinogenic" and due to the chemical compounds which comprise the brew, namely dimethyltryptamine (DMT), and its effects on human neurochemistry, in the U.S. it is currently considered a Schedule I drug under the Controlled Substances Act of 1970 (Blainey, 2014). According to the Schedule I classification system, ayahuasca along with other psychoactive plants, is considered to possess "no medical use and a high potential for abuse" (Blainey, 2014). It should be noted however that there is

little evidence to support this claim, in that ayahuasca along with other Schedule I classified substances, like LSD and psilocybin, have been medically proven to possess little to no toxicity or potential for dependency. Recent studies have even found that psychoactive chemicals like DMT, LSD, psilocybin, and MDMA (ecstasy) cause less harm to self and society than legal and highly profitable substances like alcohol and tobacco (Blainey, 2014). To the contrary, research suggests that ayahuasca and other classified substances like it can serve as a highly therapeutic tool, helping individuals overcome a range of mental and behavioral health maladies (Loizaga-Velder & Verres, 2014).

The active chemical ingredient in ayahuasca which is responsible for producing such strong visionary states is known as DMT. The leaves of the chacruna plant contain the alkaloids responsible for the psychoactive inducing state, while the ayahuasca vine contains monoamine oxidase-A (MAO) inhibitors, which prevent the alkaloids from being broken down in the gastrointestinal enzymes of the stomach (McKenna, 2004). The ayahuasca depends upon a symbiotic relationship with the chacruna plant in order for it to elicit effect. DMT, if consumed orally, does not become active within the human body, however with the introduction of a strong MAO inhibitor such as the one found in the ayahuasca vine, the DMT is able to take effect with astonishing strength and tenacity.

The most amazing and perplexing thing about this incredibly specific symbiosis that exists between the chacruna plant, the ayahuasca vine, and the human bio-chemical system, is that humans even discovered the outcome of these interactions in the first place. When posed the question by Westerners to shaman and indigenous groups who utilize ayahuasca ceremonially how they discovered that the combination of these two particular plant species, out of hundreds of thousands of other plant species in the rainforest, could illicit such an effect with humans, the

ayhuascqueros, as those who utilize ayahuasca as a healing remedy are often referred, unequivocally respond that the plants told them (Narby, 2007).

Ayahuasca as Spirit

Thus far I have provided a brief explanation from the Western perspective as to the physical and chemical processes involved in the visionary concoction known as ayahuasca. It should be noted however that according to the traditions that ingest this beverage regularly, there is much more at work than what is occurring on the physical, chemical, and molecular levels of the human body and brain. Interestingly enough, those even from a more modern and Western perspective who have partaken in the sacramental brew of ayahuasca would agree that the experience undoubtedly defies sheer explanation by means of reductionist methods alone (Narby, 2007).

For those who have partaken in the necromantic drink, the entire experience is reportedly imbued with a kind of sentience that defies plausible exposition (Luna, 2008). Participants of the solemn ritual universally agree that after the ingestion of ayahuasca, a presence becomes manifest during ceremony, emanating qualities that are both feminine and serpentine (Luna, 2008). To the converted, if it is even appropriate to label those as such, she is known as Mother Ayahuasca, the Divine Feminine, the Anima Mundi (Luna, 2008). Some even go as far as to posit that the spirit of Ayahuasca has the apperceptive awareness and intent to “encircle the world” (Harris & Gurel, 2012; McKenna 2005).

She is the Celestial Teacher and Healer, opening realms of spirit that were otherwise hidden from everyday waking consciousness (Luna, 2008). In fact, the word ayahuasca itself means “vine of souls” or “vine of the dead” for the brew frequently causes one to face their greatest fear, death (Harner, 1990). Through this sacred rite, there is also a recognition that one

is opened to the possibilities of the world of the spirits, many reporting encounters with entities that are “more real than real” (Shanon, 2003). These realms are sought out not for recreation or fun, because the experience of drinking ayahuasca, though incredibly profound and healing, is reported by many to not be necessarily an easy or enjoyable endeavor.

The spirits encountered in these realms can serve as guides, helpers, and healers, though it is acknowledged that not all entities associated with these dimensions are inherently benevolent (McKenna, 1992). The job of the maestro or shaman, the master of these in between states, is in bridging the gap, standing in the divide between the worlds of ordinary and non-ordinary reality (Schmidt, 1987). She/he calls in their helping spirits and guides through sacred songs or icaros (Luna, 2007). They have formed intimate relationships with these spirit allies through years of training, including strict dietary preparation, considerable time spent alone and in isolation, and countless journeys into these non-ordinary states of consciousness (Luna, 2007). With the help of her/his powerful allies the shaman has traversed these sacred territories time and again, having become well acquainted with the profundity of the realm of spirit (Luna, 2007). The maestro shaman is adroitly equipped to hold the space for others who wish to take the epic leap off of the edge of the ego’s comfortable facade, into the deep and profoundly dark abyss of unconscious and archetypal forces, in the hope of ascertaining some nugget of truth, healing, or wisdom, but more often than not, returning with what is much more akin to a mountain of understanding.

Spiritual Traditions Associated with Ayahuasca

There are a number of religious institutions that base their spiritual traditions around the ingestion of ayahuasca, considering it to be the transmundane glue which binds the supernal community together. Most of these traditions originated in Brazil in the 1920s, where they were

eventually awarded the legal right to utilize the sacrament without negative legislative action (Brierley & Davidson, 2012). In fact one of the churches that utilizes ayahuasca ceremonially, the UDV or Uniao do Vegetal, has been granted legal exemption to practice in the U. S. (Brierley & Davidson, 2012). Allowing religious bodies in the U. S. to practice ceremonial rites with the use of what is considered a psychotropic drug is not a novel phenomena in federal law, for the Native American Church was granted similar legislative exemption in 1994 under the AIRFA (American Indians Religious Freedom Act Amendments) with the use of what is considered their holy sacrament, peyote (Feeney, 2007).

There are at least three organized religious establishments who openly utilize ayahuasca including the UDV, Santo Daime, and Barquinha. These highly syncretic institutions originated in and around Brazil and weave together theological and cosmological metaphysical traditions from European esoteric philosophical systems, African cosmogenesis, Catholic doctrines, and indigenous folklore and botanical knowledge (Santos et al., 2007). These churches now have established congregations throughout the world including the U. S., Canada, Japan, South Africa, and throughout Europe and Latin America (Brierley & Davidson, 2012). The use of the sacrament of ayahuasca in these churches is said to resemble that of the Christian Eucharist and members consume the beverage at least twice a month in some traditions and up to four times a week in others (Santos et al., 2007).

Much research has been conducted on members of the Santo Daime and UDV communities, studies ranging from phenomenological analysis of spiritual experience to more scientific studies attempting to measure the effectiveness of the drink in the treatment of mental and behavioral health issues like addiction and depression (Blainey, 2014 & McKenna, 2004). Such studies have yielded promising results, revealing that constituents of these religious groups

exhibit more well-being than those who do not partake in the regular use of ayahuasca (Blainey, 2014; Santos, et al., 2007).

In recent years, the global phenomena of the sacred ayahuasca ritual has evolved past the confines of a strict shamanic perspective and is even evolving away from the typical syncretic religious traditions just mentioned (Trichter, Klimo, & Krippner, 2009). These ceremonies are being conducted without affiliation to any centralized organizational structure or institution and are often facilitated by a shaman or an experienced guide. These shaman and facilitators often incorporate both traditional and contemporary aspects of the ayahuasca ceremony into their practice, with there being evidence that this type of ceremony is increasing in frequency, specifically in North America (Metzner, 1999).

Therapeutic Potential

According to first hand reports, ayahuasca is not necessarily an enjoyable experience, it is not some sort of recreational, light hearted endeavor which could be equated with having a Sunday afternoon beer or even taking a gentle journey through indulgence upon a marijuana cigarette. Waves of intense nausea, frequently followed by oftentimes violent vomiting and diarrhea are common occurrences for many participants in the ayahuasca ceremony. This is just the physical demands of the ceremony, not to mention the more profound mental, emotional, and spiritual trials that often accompany the experience of one who is within the grasp of this ancient and powerful medicine (Luna, 2008).

In light of personal testimonies that assert the difficulties associated with participation in an ayahuasca ceremony, why would anyone ever consider engaging with such an intense undertaking? The short and simple answer is that this medicine is exactly that, medicine, and there are large amounts of evidence, anecdotal and otherwise, which support the notion that

ayahuasca has the profound capacity for bringing healing to the individual who partakes, healing which can take place on the holistic level, including all facets of the individual, physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual alike (Luna, 2007).

Clinical research in laboratory settings suggests that ayahuasca is physiologically benign within average dose parameters (Riba & Barbanoj, 2005; Riba & Bouso, J.C., 2011). Other studies have found that when taken long term within a ritualized, controlled, and supportive setting there are no indications of harm or toxicity (Santos, 2013). In fact, the therapeutic use of ayahuasca is being utilized as a means to treat substance dependence in several countries including Peru, Brazil, Ecuador, Colombia, Argentina, Chile, and Mexico (Loizaga-Velder & Verres, 2014).

According to one study that looked at the antidepressant effects of ayahuasca in patients with recurrent depression, administration of the drink was associated with immediate and ongoing antidepressive effects (Sanches, et al., 2015). Through the use of single photon emission tomography (SPECT), researchers were able to conclude that a single dose of ayahuasca was associated with increased blood flow to the regions of the brain that are involved in the regulation of mood and emotional states (Sanches, et al., 2015). This finding is important because hypoactivation of these regions of the brain are typically associated with depressive tendencies in a person, while hyperactivation is indicative of antidepressive effects (Sanches, et al., 2015). The study also utilized psychiatric assessment tools in order to capture the levels of depression found amongst the participants. Researchers discovered that there were significant score decreases in the measures utilized, indicating that the administration of ayahuasca had a significant impact on participant depressive affect (Sanches, et al., 2015).

Studies are also being conducted to measure the efficacy of ayahuasca as a viable treatment alternative for chemical dependency. According to a recent study conducted by Loizaga-Velder and Verres (2014), through which they interviewed 13 therapists who utilize ayahuasca professionally in addictions treatment, two expert researchers, and 14 individuals who had undergone ayahuasca assisted therapy for addictions treatment, they concluded that ayahuasca possesses potential for highly positive therapeutic outcomes, if administered within the confines of controlled settings (Loizaga-Velder & Verres, 2014).

In another study that looked at the effects of ayahuasca ritual participation on gay and lesbian identity, Cavnar (2014) ascertained that the ritual use of ayahuasca served as a means of creating and/or confirming positive sexual identity for participants in the study. Additionally, this study substantiated that there were added positive effects, beyond sexual identity, that were manifested in the lives of the participants, as a result of their ritualistic utilization of ayahuasca (Cavnar, 2014). In discussing the different religious/spiritual traditions through which participants of the study partook in ayahuasca, and the healing that occurred in the lives of participants of the study Cavnar (2014) shares, “Participants in all traditions who were interviewed focused on self-knowledge and healing, and described general enhancements to their lives as a result of participation in ayahuasca rituals that ranged from ontological revelations to changes in addictive behaviors, safer sex behaviors, enhanced personal relationships, and improved physical health” (p. 259).

Conclusion

The ritual use of ayahuasca is an abstruse rite which originated within the shamanic and indigenous landscapes of the Amazon river basin. Ayahuasca has been taken by Amazonian natives for thousands of years for the purposes of obtaining wisdom, spiritual insight, and

healing. In modern times the ceremonial use of ayahuasca has evolved to include highly structured religious institutions who utilize the beverage as a holy sacrament in their sacred traditions. More recently, the use of ayahuasca has spread throughout the world and has taken root amongst contemporary societies. Though the active chemical ingredients which compose the beverage are considered illegal in the U. S. and other countries, the current research suggests that ayahuasca possesses promising potential to assist those struggling with varied mental and behavioral health issues, if properly utilized within the confines of a therapeutic and/or devotional context. Considering the convincing evidence for the case of the ayahuasca ritual as an effective treatment modality, it would be prudent for the therapeutic community to delve more deeply into research associated with this sacred plant. For only by opening ourselves to the possibility of the sagacity of this ancient medicine, may more sophisticated and balanced ways of healing for ourselves, our species, our planet, and our souls become manifest.

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