

Altered States of Consciousness

Ayahuasca, San Pedro and the shamanic path to wholeness

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It is now more than 30 years ago since Fritjof Capra wrote 'The Tao of Physics' highlighting the remarkable similarities between Eastern religions and Western quantum physics. These insights, as Capra openly revealed in the preface, were inspired by his own personal experiences with what he called 'power plants,' plants which have been ingested by shaman for millennia, revered by peoples across the world as Gods, for their hallucinogenic properties, resulting in such extraordinary changes to their consciousness, that for many, cannot be distinguished from the spiritual and religious revelations of our greatest mystics and sages.

Capra was by no means the first scientist to gain deeper insights into the natural world from natural and synthetic hallucinogens. Alan Rees, writing in 'The Mail on Sunday', revealed the following story, which he subsequently confirmed with Crick in person: "Dick Kemp told me he met Francis Crick at Cambridge. Crick had told him that some Cambridge academics used LSD in tiny amounts as a thinking tool, to liberate them from preconceptions and let their genius wander freely to new ideas. Crick told him he had perceived the double-helix shape while on LSD."

The classic psychedelics are considered to be LSD, Psilocybin, DMT and mescaline. The two chemical groups into which these drugs are classified are the tryptamines and the phenethylamines. Tryptamines include DMT, psilocybin, LSD and Tabernanthe iboga. Phenethylamines include mescaline found in the peyote cactus and the lesser-known San Pedro cactus.

In the Amazon basin, indigenous and mestizo shaman drink the mystical brew ayahuasca. It is referred to by many different names, such as yagé, caapi, 'vine of the souls' or 'vine of the dead.' The name ayahuasca, as well as referring to the drink, also refers to the vine Banisteriopsis caapi. This vine contains three monoamine oxidase inhibitors, harmine, harmaline and tetrahydroharmine, which are hallucinogenic at sufficient dose levels.

Shaman refer to the vine, of which there are a number of varieties, as the base of the drink. The light, or the source of hallucinations, comes from either the leaf of the chacruna plant, Psychotria viridis, or from the leaves of the huambisa plant, Diplopterys cabrerana. These leaves contain N,N-dimethyltryptamine, or DMT, which is also present in the human brain. However, the hallucinogen is not active orally, since a stomach enzyme called monoamine oxidase, blocks it. The active ingredients in Banisteriopsis caapi inhibit the stomach enzyme, enabling the N,N-dimethyltryptamine to enter the brain.

The ayahuasca vine and the chacruna leaves are the basic ingredients of the ayahuasca drink. Different shaman will often add additional plants, such as toé, tobacco, pucha pari, marosa etc, for their many different properties such as cleansing, spiritual protection, enhancement of visions, and healing.

While illegal in many countries due to the active ingredient DMT being a class A category drug, ayahuasca is legal in Peru, and also Brazil, where a number of syncretic churches incorporate ayahuasca into their Christian and mystical services. Thousands of 'ayahuasca tourists' fly to Peru each year, to take part in ceremonies, and it is increasingly becoming available in North America, Europe and Australia, although those who do drink it rarely do so for purely recreational use.

The side effects of ayahuasca can include severe vomiting and diarrhea, and the visions if seen can provoke utter terror in those who experience them. Visions are only likely to be experienced if the drinker has undertaken a period of detoxing and abstinence from many different foods including coffee, alcohol, red meat, sugar, spices and salt, and therefore it is almost impossible for people to abuse. Ayahuasca is far more likely to provide some of the harshest lessons in life to those who attempt to do so.

Until around 1990, the main scientific interest in ayahuasca had been in botany, chemistry, human neuropharmacology, and anthropology. Benny Shanon, a cognitive psychologist is the first, and perhaps only, psychologist to attempt to chart the phenomenological ayahuasca experience from a psychological perspective (Shanon, 2002). Ten years of research contributed to the most comprehensive psychological study of ayahuasca undertaken, with over 2,500 user reports analyzed, complemented by Shanon's own personal experiences of around 130 ceremonies, a huge number for a scientist to have taken part in. Shanon asked the question "What is experienced when one drinks ayahuasca?" and his analysis answered by looking at the experience from many different perspectives:

- Structural Typology
- Style of visual images
- Interaction and Narration
- The Contents of Visions
- The Themes of Visions
- Ideas, Insights and Reflections
- Alterations to consciousness and perception of time
- Non-visual perceptions
- Stages and progression of visions within and across ceremonies

More recently, Shanon (2010) has expanded his topological framework, to examine in more detail the deep epistemological questions of meaning and interpretation of those who experience ayahuasca at its most ineffable and transcendental levels, and for whom orthodox theories of psychology become woefully inadequate:

Psychological Knowledge

Ayahuasca can provide novel insights and self-understanding, with ayahuasca often described as being the equivalent of receiving years of psychoanalysis in just one or two sessions.

Knowledge Related to Nature and Life

Ayahuasca drinkers will often experience a profoundly close link to nature, animals, plants and minerals, especially when it is drunk in the natural setting of the Amazonian rainforest. These experiences can be extraordinary for those who have them, for example transforming into an eagle and flying above the rainforest canopy, really experiencing what it is like to be that animal or plant or tree.

Philosophy and Metaphysics

Ayahuasca can generate philosophical and metaphysical ideations and reflections. For me, I have received deeply intuitive understandings of the symbolism of the ankh, Thoth, David Bohm's implicate order framework of quantum physics, and the Tao. These experiences utterly defy any attempts to capture in words, reflecting the teachings from many Eastern religions that true reality is beyond language, words and human understanding.

Artistic Performance and Creativity

When under the influence of ayahuasca, the level of musical, singing and occasionally dancing performances is greatly enhanced. I have found that when singing icaros, sacred healing songs of which I have been taught, I have sung with a delicacy, intonation and vibrato that I could never think of achieving outside of an ayahuasca ceremony.

Specialized and Factual Knowledge

Shanon emphatically states that he does not believe in paranormal or parapsychological phenomena, and is explicit in stating that he has found no evidence of the obtaining of new factual evidence through drinking ayahuasca. This is in direct contrast to Stanislav Grof, who does provide compelling evidence that this is the case with those who are administered LSD in a supportive psychotherapeutic context (Grof, 2009).

Only a very tiny proportion of Shanon's research has been with indigenous or Mestizo shaman, who for centuries and more probably millennia have drunk ayahuasca in order to be able to diagnose illness in patients 'supernaturally'. They do so in partnership with the spirits of the plants, who they refer to as los doctores. Shanon collated personal reports of the phenomena, but did not complement these with any other forms of analysis or experimentation. Shanon's interpretation is that "what ayahuasca furnishes is heightened insight and comprehension which are based on already existing empirical knowledge and long-term practice" (Shanon, 2010).

Those shaman in the Amazon who are healers who drink ayahuasca to diagnose illness are more commonly known as curanderos, and their training and experience with ayahuasca generally starts when they are in their teens. They will, from an early age, be taught by a teacher, their maestro, to recognize thousands of plants and their healing properties. However, to really get to know ayahuasca, and to really get to know the spirits of the plants, the apprentice curandero has to spend not months but years alone in the rainforest, without clothes, just a blanket, following an extremely limited diet of mainly fish, plantain and other jungle fruit. In these years of solitude, the apprentice will drink both ayahuasca and samples of every plant, flower or tree that they will be using as future medicines, to become intimate with the properties of that plant.

The curandero heals in partnership with the spirits of the plants, and it is this that the plants teach the shaman how to do. The shaman heals holistically, by determining what 'illness' is trapped within the patient's soul or spiritual body. This form of illness is conceived as an energy imbalance, where perhaps emotions and negative thinking become trapped in the body, resulting in more physical illnesses in the physical body. In order to heal a patient, the plants will show the shaman where in the spiritual body these concentrations of negative energy are, and the shaman will then use a combination of techniques to extract them. These include the singing of sacred songs, icaros, while playing shacapa, an instrument made from dried leaves of the carrizo plant, blowing tobacco smoke, blowing sacred breath into the spiritual body (soplas), and also sucking the energy out of the body (chupas).

Following a sudden growth of interest with westerners in the last 20 years, a number of books about ayahuasca have been published, but very few have documented in any detail the incredibly rich and sophisticated pharmacological knowledge and conceptual frameworks of illness of the curandero (Luna, 1984; Beyer, 2009). There have been no medical studies of this healing modality, despite much anecdotal evidence of its efficacy, and despite shamanism being the oldest spiritual and healing practice, although the relatively new multidisciplinary ethnopharmacology is starting to redress this issue.

The approach I have taken with my research with ayahuasca has been to complement both the works of Shanon and Beyer with a comprehensive and structured phenomenological account of my own experiences as an apprentice ayahuasca curandero (Robinson, 2010). I first travelled to Peru in 2008 to participate in a two week ayahuasca retreat, in order to heal some deep psychological traumas from the past. I then decided to return to Peru in 2009, simply to participate in some further ayahuasca ceremonies with Javier Arevalo, but to my surprise, and without asking, was taken on as his apprentice.

Javier continually emphasized to me that the visions experienced by both an apprentice and maestro shaman are qualitatively different to those of participants or patients. Javier initiated me into the secrets of the shacapa, taught me icaros, and how to perform the sopla, the sacred healing breath on a patient. Within any literature on curanderos, it is extremely rare to read an account by a westerner who has been taught how to perform a diagnosis, via conscious communication with the spirits of plants, using the full range of shamanic techniques, as I have attempted to do so.

The first thing I should say is that I had to learn how to move from head consciousness to heart consciousness, to really trust ayahuasca not fight it, and this lesson was probably the hardest, as it involved a shamanic initiation by the ayahuasca, whereby my body was slowly killed off, one vital organ at a time. This was not a visual hallucination, this was having the experience in the total belief that it is happening to you, and for me it was terrifying to the point where a trained therapist had told it had been the worst psychotic episode she had ever witnessed. Many people do not go back to ayahuasca having experienced the legendary terrors that it can bring, but I did.

Javier structured my lessons so that initially I would be drinking quite mild ayahuasca. I was slowly introduced to los doctores, or perhaps they slowly introduced themselves, and showed me how they help the shaman diagnose illness not through any form of empirical language-based knowledge, but in a more visual, direct and intuitive way. It is this form of knowledge of a curandero that Shanon makes no reference to, which I feel reflects his lack of this specific form of experience with ayahuasca. In each ceremony the doctores were teaching me by showing me how they were healing my own body, and again it is rare in the ayahuasca literature to read accounts of experiences inside the 'body'.

Although it is nigh on impossible to explain, what is an ineffable experience, I will try. Ayahuasca can be said to make your body 'transparent', and I certainly found this to be the case. Lying down, in the darkness of a temple in the rainforest, listening to Javier's beautiful icaros calling the doctores to us, around an hour after first ingesting the brew, I would sense them approach me. I would often experience them not as Beyer did, taking on a human form, but as fantastic matrices of light, highly organic matrix structures, dancing as they flew, fusing with my own consciousness so that we would become one. My physical body would gradually begin to melt into nothingness, and I would experience a vast expansion of my own consciousness which would correspond with seeing the doctores expand in many dimensions. Their canopies of light would unfold in such a way that it was like being in a hyper-dimensional brilliantly electroluminescent cathedral, looking up at an ever expanding ceiling of beams, arches and patterns that would stretch into an impossible vastness, which was my, or our, expanded consciousness.

They would then inside of this space 'fly' to any particular part of my body requiring treatment and they could show me symbolically where the negative energy was. Of course this energy had to be expelled, and this is done via the purge, via either vomiting or diarrhea, or both. When working with a patient, the doctores are able to be extremely precise in locating the area of the body that the illness is in. In one patient, a very young child, I was shown dark menacing insects in his urinary system, and was shown the achiote plant which was to be used as the cure. Javier after the ceremony confirmed that the child did indeed have an infection in this area, and that the achiote was the correct plant for the cure.

Are the visions of the shaman qualitatively different from participants, or patients? A curandero will have drunk ayahuasca thousands of times, unlike the vast majority of westerners who travel to Peru and the wider Amazon to take part in perhaps only one, two or a very small handful of ceremonies. These initial ceremonies by westerners can be spectacular, for example with reports of metamorphosis into eagles, flying over the canopy of the rainforest. But Javier was clear that these are just providing a very cursory insight into the spiritual world. What I experienced was initially disorientating, going far beyond any form of words, going far beyond any kind of world that had the structure of three dimensions and time, one that could only be experienced with a parallel and extreme alteration and expansion to my consciousness.

Time and again, those who have ingested ayahuasca and other hallucinogens report that they experience reality as an undivided wholeness, and also that both time and space are perceived to cease to exist. It is intriguing to speculate that perhaps one of the effects of hallucinogens in the brain is to enable the person to experience the implicate order of David Bohm (1980) directly. Bohm's concept of wholeness and the implicate order certainly can be seen as very shamanic in nature (and can also be likened to the metaphysics of for example Taoism or Hinduism). Javier continually emphasised the fact that this world was an illusion, and that only the spiritual world mattered, or was the true reality. I asked for clarification, in terms of the relationship of this world to the spiritual world, and rather than giving a Platonic or dualist account, Javier said that although the material world was a part of the spiritual world, it was just one tiny fragment, mirroring the way in which Bohm describes the relationship of the explicate to the implicate.

The concept of expansion came up many times in ceremonies, and in one in particular, ayahuasca told me that science could only advance if it made the transition from reduction to expansion. I feel that it is now time that we expanded our thinking away from a reliance on reductionism, expanding our scientific thinking to include what are actually very ancient concepts of wholeness. These can really only be experienced in an intuitive mode of consciousness, and natural plant hallucinogens, if treated with the reverence and respect of our indigenous people across the planet, promise to guide us on our journeys to wholeness, and open up a vast new expanse of knowledge that is holistic in every sense of the word.

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**Ode to Master and His Emissary (postscript)**

*I've just grasped a paradox not understood
By quantum mechanic's great brotherhood
How can a wave and a particle be
one and the same simultaneously?*

*If they'd read Iain's book it would become clear
In the context of Left and Right hemisphere
The kind of attention we bring to our seeing
Determines the world that we bring into being*

*The Left brings a particle – matter embodied
The Right an informative wave that's less solid
Is it 'Explicate' – 'Implicate' here that we witness?
David Bohm's explanation of unbroken wholeness*

*Descartes thought therefore he was
Cogito ergo sum
Only consciousness is certain
But we don't know from where its come.*

Val Charlton