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# Drug Tourism or Spiritual Healing? Ayahuasca Seekers in Amazonia<sup>†</sup>

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**Abstract**—This research addresses the question of whether Westerners who seek traditional spiritual medicine known as ayahuasca can be best characterized as “drug tourists” or as people pursuing spiritual and therapeutic opportunities. Participants in an ayahuasca retreat in Amazonia were interviewed regarding their motivations for participation and the benefits they felt that they received. These findings from the interviews were organized to reveal common motivations and benefits. Contrary to the characterization as “drug tourists,” the principal motivations can be characterized as: seeking spiritual relations and personal spiritual development; emotional healing; and the development of personal self-awareness, including contact with a sacred nature, God, spirits and plant and natural energies produced by the ayahuasca. The motivation and perceived benefits both point to transpersonal concerns, with the principal perceived benefits involving increased self awareness, insights and access to deeper levels of the self that enhanced personal development and the higher self, providing personal direction in life.

**Keywords**—ayahuasca, drug tourism, emotional healing, hallucinogens, psychedelics, spiritual development

Traditional cultural use of sacred plants has attracted international attention, producing a phenomenon that Dobkin de Rios (1994) referred to as “drug tourism.” This involves people from industrialized countries traveling to the Third World in search of substances that, while banned in most Western nations, are considered to be sacred plants in local traditions. In her article, Dobkin de Rios comments on this phenomenon in the Amazon, where North Americans and Europeans seek out the use of a traditional brew known as “ayahuasca.” Similar excursions to use sacred plants in many parts of the world are described in shamanistic and New Age magazines.

This demand created by a drug-consumer tourist has led to what Dobkin de Rios and others refer to as “charlatan psychiatry” involving nonauthentic folk healers who

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act with intentions of defrauding tourists. Their clients are given the impression of participating in traditional rituals and using traditional plant remedies, but they are often questionable potions delivered in contrived situations—“staged dramas.” These circumstances have also been reported to involve sexual predation, where local purveyors of these substances take advantage of people whose faculties are compromised by the effects. Furthermore, the commercialization of these products has attracted the attention of the authorities and has produced repressive governmental responses against the traditional use patterns in these groups. Dobkin de Rios further chastises these drug tourists for their lack of understanding of the native cultures and an inability to distinguish these native tribal peoples from Spanish-speaking mestizos from large towns. She further notes that “this touristic enterprise . . . [has] an evil exploitative aspect that is impossible to ignore. These ‘native healers’ are common drug dealers dressed for deception” (Dobkin de Rios 1994: 19).

This may be true for some, but is this a fair characterization of all of these activities? Healers too may be taken

advantage of by promoters who keep most of the revenues from the tourists, with local healers receiving very little of the profits. Healers themselves may be threatened, even having their families killed, as happened to Maria Sabina in Oaxaca, Mexico (see Estrada 1981).

Dobkin de Rios also points out that, unlike the anthropological enterprise of cultural understanding, there is little hope for communication between the drug tourists and indigenous people. But is this tribal culture what the ayahuasca seekers are attempting to attain? Dobkin de Rios placed this phenomenon of drug tourism in the context of the "empty self" caused by loss of community, family and shared meaning. Consumer products may fill up this empty self, meeting short term needs for self development and growth. Drug abuse can also play a role in this need to fill the self, providing chemically-mediated emotional experiences.

Is this really "drug-dilettantism" (dilettantism as a disconnected, unmethodical desultory activity for amusement), as Dobkin de Rios characterizes it? What are the reasons people have for this form of tourism? What is the basis for these phenomena of Westerners seeking traditional spiritual treatments, the use of the sacred plants and entheogens characterized as hallucinogens, psychedelics and narcotics in American law enforcement? This article attempts to provide an initial answer to these questions through a study of participants in an ayahuasca retreat in Amazonia. Participants in an ayahuasca retreat activity were interviewed to ascertain their motivations for participation in the retreat and the benefits they experienced having received from the ayahuasca sessions. A synthesis of their responses is used to illustrate reasons for their participation and the perceived effects, with the background of the participants used to illustrate their motives for participation in cultural healing.

A brief description of the traditional background of ayahuasca use and its modification in modern activities is provided. The specific setting of current activities is deliberately ambiguous to protect group leaders, participants and the investigator. Activities involving the use of ayahuasca are legal in the Amazonia country where this retreat took place. However, the specific context of the activities, involving the recruitment of foreigners to participate in these rituals in this country, raises some questions that are legally ambiguous. Retreat participants entered the country as tourists, while their actual activities might have been better characterized as conference participants or clients seeking therapeutic services, activities for which a more complicated visa process might have been required.

### AYAHUASCA THEN AND NOW

Ayahuasca is considered to be the most widely employed hallucinogen in Amazonia, with combinations based on the *Banisteriopsis* genus found in more than 70 different ethnic groups representing 20 language families in the Amazon basin and other areas of South America (Luna

1986). Ayahuasca is a combination of plants, including extractions of the bark of a forest liana of the Malpighia Family or Malpighiaceae (*Banisteriopsis sp.*) and other additive plants, particularly *Psychotria viridis* or *Diplopterys cabrerana*. These additive plants have been considered the principal source of the active ingredients of ayahuasca, with the beta carboline alkaloids in the *Banisteriopsis* acting as a monoamine oxydase inhibitor which makes the tryptamines of the additive plants orally active.

A wide range of studies<sup>1</sup> have discussed the traditional therapeutic uses of plants medicines based upon *Banisteriopsis*. Dobkin de Rios (1984) summarizes the many indigenous therapeutic uses of ayahuasca, which include acquiring protective spirits, determining the causes and cures of diseases, prophesizing the future, determining if wives were unfaithful, sending messages to other groups, discovering enemies and their plans, and preparing for war or hunting expeditions. Luna's (1986) review emphasizes the widespread use of ayahuasca in establishing relations with a special source of knowledge and power for dealing with all aspects of life, with the plant spirits viewed as active and intelligent beings who provide direction and assistance in diagnosing and curing illness; finding game; contacting distant relatives. establishing and maintaining relations between villages; learning myths, art, chants and dances; and gaining direction and guidance throughout life (paraphrase from Schultes & Winkelman 1996: 220). Within the past century, these indigenous ayahuasca traditions have been adopted by mestizo and urban populations, particularly in Brazil where they have formed legitimate and legally accepted churches (see Labate 2004; Grosiman & Sell 1996). These traditional healing practices have also been adapted in Amazonia for drug abuse rehabilitation (Mabit, Goive & Vega 1996), as well as for Westerners who travel to Amazonia in search of the ayahuasca experiences (Labate 2004; Luna 2003).

### The Ayahuasca Retreat

The general format of the retreat that is the basis for the data reported here involved night-long ayahuasca sessions followed by one or two days of rest, artistic activities and academic presentations before a subsequent session. In all, participants were offered the opportunity for four nights of ayahuasca ceremonies. The activities began shortly after nightfall in a large round open-spaced building enclosed with screens. The ritual aspects were minimalist, with little formality beyond an opening activity in which each participant was invited to share their intentions and expectations for the event. Following these disclosures, participants were invited to drink a small cup of ayahuasca (approximately 8 oz.), but were able to increase or decrease their dosage as desired, or to take additional dosages later in the evening. Lime wedges were offered to cut the unpleasant aftertaste. Shortly thereafter

the participants retired to mattresses arranged around the periphery of the room, and the lights were extinguished. The organizers played music through a sound system, generally instrumental selections, representing musical traditions from around the world. The musical ambiance lasted throughout most of the night, with a simple meal offered in an adjoining building around 2 a.m.

## METHODS

The participants in this ayahuasca retreat in Amazonia were mostly European and North American, with 11 males and five females. The investigator was a staff participant in this retreat, providing academic presentations regarding ayahuasca and similar substances, as well as their cultural, psychological, social, clinical and neurological effects (e.g., see Winkelman 2001, 1996). The attendees at this retreat were invited to participate in these interviews, with the approval of the retreat organizers. The attendees were advised of their rights as human subjects to anonymity, to refuse participation, and to withdraw from the interview at any time.<sup>2</sup> All 16 of the retreat participants elected to participate in the interviews. The motivations of these participants and the benefits they perceived that they received from the activities were elicited in an unstructured open-ended questionnaire format that began with inquiries into their personal and professional background and previous experiences with ayahuasca and similar substances.

### Participants: The Unusual Cast of Characters

The 16 people attending this 11-day retreat were in general professionals from the U.S. and European who had paid approximately \$3,000 for the expenses incurred in this nearly two-week activity. A brief characterization of them illustrates their diversity:

- A 51-year-old female American who worked in nursing and education.
- A 54-year-old male U.S. citizen working in a South American country as a political risk consultant, screen writer and actor.
- A 41-year-old female from New York who worked as a drug abuse counselor using acupuncture for detoxification.
- A 26-year old-male from Hawaii who worked as a bartender and characterized himself as an "underground psychologist."
- A 40-year-old male English citizen working as a piano teacher.
- A 71-year-old male Belgian national who was a retired physician and psychologist.
- A 58-year-old female Canadian who was a former dancer and actress currently working as an intuitive consultant and workshop leader for psychic development.
- A 40ish female Japanese fashion designer.

- A 50-year-old female Venezuelan who was a political consultant for a nongovernmental organization.
- A 27-year-old male American who worked in a group home for adolescents.
- A 40-year-old male film producer from New York.
  - A 50-year-old male musician from New York who was also a channeler-medium and the author of a book on spirit mediumship.
- A 36-year-old male from England who worked as a computer programmer.
- A 49-year-old male from Sweden with professional degrees in English, acupuncture, and astrology who worked as a web programmer.
- A 39-year-old male Austrian national who recently lived in Japan where he worked as a photographer and in visual media.
- A male U.S. citizen in his sixties living in a Western state who was a former firefighter and laborer and currently held a high position in a conservative church.

### Interview Process

Interviews were carried out in informal settings at the retreat center, and conducted jointly with a Brazilian researcher who had written a number of publications on ayahuasca. These interviews were conducted in English, the primary language for most participants. They began in the days following the initial sessions, and continued until the last day of the retreat. Interviews were recorded on cassette tape and manually, with the current investigator taking hand notes; the recordings were later reviewed to add detail to the notes that provide the basis of this report.

## RESULTS

The findings of this study were produced by reviewing the interview transcriptions derived from field notes to extract central sentences that reflected the information solicited regarding motivations for participation and benefits from the ayahuasca experiences. These statements, reflecting the investigator's summary of the person's motivations and benefits, were organized around common topical themes.

### Motivations

The motivations summarized in the following statements illustrate that the principal reasons involved establishing spiritual awareness and relations and personal spiritual development. For many, the motivation included emotional healing, and for some, assistance in dealing with substance abuse issues. Others expressed the desire to get a personal direction in life, to engage in a personal evolution. Only one respondent mentioned hedonistic reasons, i.e. the visual effects produced by ayahuasca. Summaries of the motivations expressed fall into the following categories:

- **Spiritual relations:**

He offered that he "used ayahuasca to connect with mother nature and healing." The experience was part of his spiritual quest to get in touch with his guides and "find out why I am here."

His motivation for this experience was to "become an evolved god. On ayahuasca I feel like I am a god. Ayahuasca gives me the opportunity to act like God, experience heaven on earth. Ayahuasca is training to be a god."

Her motivation for using ayahuasca was to "find something greater than myself, open my mind, dissolve boundaries, and expand awareness and consciousness." She expressed an existential desire to take advantage of the experiences of the body on earth to get beyond the material limits, to look for answers.

She also spoke of a spiritual motivation in her presence here, to explore her personal relationship to the universe, the plant kingdom, to connect with the spirits and plant energies.

He also uses ayahuasca and other plants to maintain contact with plant spirits and plant teachers.

- **Personal spiritual development:**

His purpose for these sessions was to "find out, to experience the truth of who I am, and in relation to everything I relate to."

She saw ayahuasca as "something healthy, not just a drug trip, but something spiritual, transcendent." She was hoping for a cosmological experience, something spiritual, grand and beautiful.

His motivation for taking ayahuasca was to facilitate his development of spirit mediumship, particularly a "direct independent voice." "The path of ayahuasca is a spiritual path," he offered.

She was hoping that ayahuasca would give her more imagination, a new direction in life, a "the power to see inside myself."

- **Emotional healing:**

His motivation for using ayahuasca was "emotional healing" and "spiritual healing."

His motivation for using ayahuasca was his health, viewing it as the "ultimate medicine" to stabilize the mind, calm fears, enhance intelligence, and get mental clarity and enlightenment.

He wanted to experience ayahuasca to "deal with unfinished stuff" and to "get rid of frustration, break out of constraints, and get in touch with the transpersonal."

His motivation of coming to the ayahuasca seminar was that he intuited that ayahuasca could give him important information pertaining to family issues, his future path, and career.

His motivation for using ayahuasca was an intuitive decision that it would help him in the next step of his healing. He wants to heal his asthma and "learn

how to let go."

He hoped to get a wider philosophical and spiritual understanding, a different mindset, and address some personal problems.

- **Purpose and direction:**

She decided to come to the seminar was to find a new direction in life, "to get a big blast to overcome the blockages." She said she "felt that ayahuasca would push her forward to the next phase, create a movement within the self."

He characterized his motivations for coming as "part of my path. I felt called to come here, my heart was called." He had heard about ayahuasca journeys and during a holotropic breathwork workshop, "I felt called to the plants."

She hoped that the ayahuasca experiences would "give answers as to what to do next," "expand her mind and consciousness beyond the limits of culture," and "learn about reality and evolve."

- **Drug abuse related issues:**

His motivation for attending the seminar was to overcome self-destructive addictive patterns (involving alcohol) that were holding him back.

She also thought that ayahuasca would help her stop drinking alcohol.

- **Scientific knowledge:**

Her motivation for attending this ayahuasca seminar included interest in the academic component to the conference and the artist workshops.

His motivations for attending were to learn a scientific point of view about ayahuasca and to have the opportunity for personal use that would help him "get into a state of spirituality."

- **Hedonistic reasons:**

He characterized his motivations by saying "I came to see free pictures, to see the visuals, the amazing things. He added "I wanted to see what influence this could have on my work."

## **Benefits**

The benefits that the participants received were characterized principally in terms of increased self awareness and personal development. Insights into one's life, access to deeper levels of the self and strengthening the higher self were significant benefits. The desire for a more general enlightenment into the human condition as well as one's own life and directions were often stated. The benefits can be grouped into the following categories:

- **Self-awareness and development:**

He stated that ayahuasca had changed his life, giving him insights, clarity, awareness and emotional healing.

He feels that ayahuasca helped him access deeper levels of the self. "It makes me feel aware of what is going on inside of me, what has made my life the

way it appears." He said that it helped him understand his fears and resistance and "get inside of good and evil."

He felt that ayahuasca gave him enlightenment, and hoped that it would help him find out about shape shifting from the physical to the non-physical, and the shamanic development of phlegm.

He felt that the ayahuasca session "teaches me about what it is to be human, exist on the planet. It is a valuable relationship."

What she has received from her ayahuasca experiences is that "ayahuasca is a friend that you can work with." She felt that she had also learned that you don't have to try to be what others expect. She had received clarity, awareness and was learning not to judge.

She now feels more in control. "With the ayahuasca my higher self is stronger. Now if I want to cry, laugh or dance, I can do it. I can decide now how I feel." She adds "now it seems like maybe I know everything. I can control everything myself. Before I worried about losing control."

What he had received from the ayahuasca sessions were visions and other experiences that helped him learn about himself—but he wished to keep those personal insights to himself.

He felt he had received a "tremendous variety of perspectives" "a clearer understanding of how I was brought up, the effects of the mindsets of parents, family and social environment."

He felt that the session had helped him discover personal qualities that were producing a dramatic shift in him, allowing him "to let go of issues."

The session had provoked him to "reconsider what I am all about, supposed to be and do."

What she had received from ayahuasca was meditation, thinking and insight. "I get focus on insights and feel calm."

She said that she had a vision of a new place in life, being better able to deal with anxiety and not being afraid to be true to her self and express it.

- Emotional healing:

He feels that the plants help him. "My perpetual suffering is gone. I have less fear and can deal with it better. My anxiety levels are virtually gone. He volunteered that "ayahuasca brought spiritual experiences to my life."

She feels that she got a lot from the ayahuasca, beginning with completion of dealing with pain from the past, resolving pain from her mother and other family issues that she had not integrated. She said that she had worked through some death issues. "Now I can embrace life in a new way. I came to a sense of who I really am," she said. "I see the emergence of a beautiful goddess." She confessed to

having "given myself away early in life, losing control to others who induced feelings of guilt. "Now I am recovering myself from a deeper place that never really fully unfolded."

- Spiritual experiences:

He felt that because of ayahuasca he had become an "evolved god" and had been aided in his search for immortality. With ayahuasca he received a means to verify what he already knew, the proof. Before he lived by faith but now he had sure knowledge. He felt that ayahuasca made him an exemplary participant in doctrinal discussions in his church, providing him with insight to share with others.

He saw ayahuasca as a unique tool for contact with astral space and other dimensions.

He added "ayahuasca has given me perceptions that there is more to them than just a chemical process. There is another reality that we can step into and out of. That spirit reality seems much more real now."

- Physical healing:

He felt that already his body felt stronger and that the mental experiences were repairing damage to his body, "resetting my neurological system."

He also felt he had received a "physical healing," with ayahuasca directly working out physical and emotional problems and helping him sort out personal issues.

- Direction in life:

He also felt that it was putting his life in a positive direction, making him more integrated.

He also felt he had a clear understanding of "what to do in the future, where I am going."

- Bad experiences:

His early assessment of what he had received from the ayahuasca was "not much fun, too much discomfort," referring to extreme nausea, a lot of suffering for a little effect. More positive opinions were offered later.

What she got out of the program in the initial days was "nothing" and a "bad experience," referring to the nausea and vomiting. More positive opinions were offered later.

### Case Study: A Personal Search

The following case study, while derived from a different setting in Amazonia, provides a narrative account of a personal experience of the life-effects of the *ayahuasca* ritual.<sup>3</sup>

My intentions before embarking on the Amazon adventure that included two ayahuasca ceremonies were not well articulated before I departed. My intentions were aligned with my belief that one must remove one's self from her comfort zone to explore the hidden reaches of the Self. I knew it was

going to be an insightful and challenging experience, but I had no idea how profound the experience was going to be. However, it was not until I returned from the trip that the effects began to reveal the purpose.

My experiences took place on the Aucayacu River, a small tributary off the Ucayali River in Peru and very close to the border of the Brazilian state of Acre. Here I spent time with the family of my guide, Juan. The day after arriving, the *ayahuasqueros* came, and that night I experienced my first ayahuasca ceremony. The vomiting started within the first 10 or 15 minutes after I drank. The ayahuasca is a harshly bitter tasting substance going down. Coming back out it was vile and overwhelming, and so were its effects.

The vomiting is a necessary part of the healing aspect of the ayahuasca. It is the purging of the negative, of the *dis-ease*, so that one may heal from whatever it is she needs to heal from. After the hours of this violent vomiting came equally violent diarrhea, also a purging of the negative. It was an exorcism. Another physical effect of the ayahuasca is the loss of motor skills. Because it is a neurotoxin, my body became like wet pasta. I could not stand without help and even found it difficult to sit up. This loss of control of the body is linked to the transcendence one is supposed to make to move beyond the physical realm and commune with the spirit world.

At the same time I was feeling these physical effects, I was seeing a different world of very concrete looking images of brick temples and serpents and shooting stars. But much of these hallucinations were so overwhelming, I could not look for long and spent a lot of time with my eyes closed.

But that was only an escape from the visual. There was a torrent of language that rushed into my head from the deep storages that I hold in my inner self and all this was negative and vile, just like my vomit. I felt like I was being beaten. I felt like the universe was beating me back down to size; my culture, my society, my world allows me to think I am less vulnerable and insignificant than I really am. It was time to be stripped of my ego and of the illusions that go with ego and to face the overwhelming truth of my humble mortality. I thought I was going to die, but it was my ego that was dying. It was ego death.

I didn't really sleep at all that night, and went to the river to bathe at a.m., still with weak and shaky legs and a lingering visual enhancement of the morning. I felt like I was being baptized by the jungle. I was exhausted and humbled. I rested for the rest of the day, and by the afternoon, I returned to a totally normal physical state. No pain, no soreness, no hangover. Clear, but forever changed.

Much came out of this experience and every aspect of the journey contributed to it. Beyond the ayahuasca ceremonies there was the lesson the people of the jungle teach simply by existing as living examples of a genuine peace and simplicity I could never know. But one of the most profound lessons I came away from the ayahuasca ceremony with is the idea of ego. It is this understanding of ego that I began to explore after the experience, upon my return to "reality," and have been reading pieces from different spiritual and cultural perspectives on the idea of ego. I by no means dominate this concept; I can only offer what meaning it has taken within my own personal understanding, an understanding that is not even complete.

To me, my ego is something like a tool that allows me to move through the material world of humanity. It is a costume I wear as I play the game of being a woman in the theater show of the modern world. But Self exists behind this

costume and it is a much-unexplored realm, because my culture stops at ego. To modern Western society, ego is the end-all, be-all, and everything we do is to feed our ego, personally and collectively. One of the lessons my experience with ayahuasca has allowed me to see is that there is a world beyond ego; a place limitless and unexplored by many, including myself. I wonder what humanity would be like if we could collectively transcend ego. I imagine our world would be vastly different.

## DISCUSSION

The motivations offered by participants in the ayahuasca retreat were primarily focused upon issues of spiritual relations and development, an interest reflected in the concept of entheogens often applied to these substances by sympathetic observers. The idea that these substances could provide such experiences was prominent in most of the respondents' motivations. They also pointed to the potential for healing, particularly emotional healing, as a reason for their activities. Another secondary goal was obtaining personal direction in life, insights into their purpose and future.

Participants expressed the outcome of their experiences in terms of an increased and enhanced awareness of their own self, having obtained insight into deeper levels of their being. Some spoke of enlightenment, access to the higher self, and greater self-awareness. However, the spiritual and personal development emphasized in their motivations were not as clearly expressed in their assessment of their experiences. A number of participants emphasized their experience of emotional and physical healing. However, very few emphasized the personal direction expressed in their motivations.

Contrary to the hypothesized motivation of "drug tourism," only one participant referred explicitly to the drug-induced experiences in a hedonistic way. Nonetheless, most of the participants had already used similar substances, such as peyote, mescaline, LSD and other natural and designer psychedelics. Their primary motivations, however, were related to issues of spiritual experiences and personal spiritual development. The ideas of contact with a sacred nature, God, spirits and plant and natural energies were expressed by many participants; others emphasized the importance of their personal spiritual development being promoted by the plant experiences. These experiences point to transpersonal concerns in general as the motivations, patterns clearly attested to in the responses to the perceived benefits of the activity, which were characterized as increased self awareness, insights into one's life, and access to deeper levels of the self. Perceived effects included a sense of personal development and strengthening the higher self, aspects of transpersonal development some characterized as a general enlightenment into the human condition, and obtaining personal direction in one's life.

## CONCLUSIONS

The illegality of ayahuasca in the U.S. because of its chemical constituents may erroneously lead one to conclude that it is merely another substance for abuse. Such perspectives fail to recognize the many positive cultural and personal effects found with the use of these plants in the cultural context of other societies, especially Brazil and other cultures of the Amazon region (e.g., see Labate 2004; Labate & Araujo 2002; Luna & White 2000). While it may be easy to dismiss Westerners who seek such experiences of ayahuasca as drug dilettantes, their own motivations for participation in these experiences and the personal outcomes suggest very different orientations. These include forms of cultural therapy and spiritual quest, aspects of the effects of these substances found in their use throughout the world (Winkelman 1996).

Limitations do exist in terms of generalizing the findings of this one "ayahuasca retreat" to all others. Indeed, to characterize all ayahuasca retreats in the terms described here would be erroneous. As Dobkin de Rios (1994) has pointed out, problems exist in many of these kinds of programs, with participants being preyed upon by organizers, "shamans," and other participants. Participants in this particular program may have also been a select professional group, many with experience with both similar substances

and with psychological counseling. Yet, until more widespread and systematic studies of this kind are carried out, we will not know how typical this particular program is and the extent of the problems brought to our attention by Dobkin de Rios' timely and seminal publication.

## NOTES

1. For example Schultes, Hoffman & Rätsch 2001; Groisman & Sell 1996; Dobkin de Rios 1992, 1984; Payaguaje 1990; Andritzky 1989; Luna 1986; Naranjo 1983; Harner 1973, 1972; Kensinger 1973.

2. This study was construed as exempt from human subjects review because of the ethnographic nature of the study, using informal conversational approaches rather than a formal questionnaire. Because the opportunity to carry out this research was offered at the retreat site, there was not an opportunity to seek human subjects certification of the exemption. The participants were nonetheless advised of their rights as subjects, including the right not to participate or to withdraw from the interaction at any time. Only one participant at the retreat initially declined to participate; this person then later agreed and participated.

3. Thanks to Veronica Fiedler for offering to share this personal insight into ayahuasca effects upon her life.

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## APPENDIX

## Case Studies of Retreat Participants

**Case 1:** This 36-year-old English male (who worked as a programmer) had no background of drugs of abuse, not even alcohol. He proclaimed no religious background and no spirituality as a child. He has a history of utilization of psychological and psychiatric services to address childhood trauma issues, emotional problems and anxiety, but therapy provided limited relief. He had read about LSD psychotherapy and ibogaine therapies, and based upon knowledge of the psychopharmacology thought they could be useful for him. Although he was not a drug user/addict, he enrolled in Deborah Mash's ibogaine treatment program, because "I knew it would help me." Subsequently he quit taking his psychiatric medication (beta blockers). In a second ibogaine treatment period he learned about ayahuasca from the staff. He subsequently used ayahuasca several times in Amsterdam and then in Brazil and Peru, where he also used ayahuasca analogues and other plant teachers.

His motivation for using ayahuasca was "emotional healing" and "spiritual healing." He also uses ayahuasca and other plants to maintain contact with plant spirits and plant teachers. His attendance at this specific seminar was to obtain condensed repetitive experiences. He feels that the plants help him. "My perpetual suffering is gone. I have less fear and can deal with it better. My anxiety levels are virtually gone. He volunteered that "ayahuasca brought spiritual experiences to my life." He stated that ayahuasca had changed his life, giving him insights, clarity, awareness and emotional healing.

**Case 2:** A 49-year-old Swedish male with professional degrees in English, acupuncture, and astrology worked as a web programmer. He did not have a religious background but practiced meditation and theosophy. He does not use other drugs, which he categorically rejected early in his life, but he had taken DMT in a "Sacred Pipe" ceremony. He first heard about ayahuasca from a friend who attended a session in Stockholm. He subsequently used ayahuasca for the first time in Sweden three months before the Amazon seminar.

His motivation for using ayahuasca was an intuitive decision that it would help him in the next step of his healing. He wants to heal his asthma and "learn how to let go." He felt that the Amazon setting would give deep healing and felt great confidence in the seminar organizer. He offered that he "used ayahuasca to connect with mother nature and healing." The experience was part of his spiritual quest to get in touch with his guides and "find out why I am here." He feels that ayahuasca helped him access deeper levels of the self. At the time of the interview he felt that he was in the middle of a process that would lead to more in the future. "It makes me feel aware of what is going on inside of me, what has made my life the way it appears." He said that it helped him understand his fears and resistance and "get inside of good and evil."

**Case 3:** This 39-year-old Austrian national had most recently lived in Japan where he worked as a photographer and in visual media. He stated that he was agnostic, never really religious. He discounted having sought psychological care but offered that he had engaged in humanistic psychology, neurolinguistic programming, Rolfing and sensory deprivation tanks. He had used ibogaine, LSD, DMT, 2CB, MDMA, and ayahuasca before this seminar, and had participated in Santo Daime ceremonies in Japan and other places.

His motivation for using ayahuasca was his health; he viewed it as the "ultimate medicine" to stabilize the mind, calm fears, enhance intelligence, get mental clarity and enlightenment. He came to this seminar to give a friend the opportunity to share in the same experiences and because he likes the context of doing ayahuasca with "Western people" (other participants as opposed to Santo Daime). He noted the nondoctrinal aspect of the seminar as an attractive feature. He also pointed out his familiarity with ayahuasca as a motivator: "ayahuasca is already in my body; it is familiar to my body." He felt that ayahuasca gave him enlightenment, and hoped that it would help him find out about shape shifting from the physical to the nonphysical, and the shamanic development of phlegm. He hoped that ayahuasca would allow him to see his own genetic code and cleanse toxins from his body. He felt that his body was already stronger and that the mental experiences were repairing damage to his body, "resetting my neurological system." He saw ayahuasca as a unique tool for contact with astral space and other dimensions. He also felt that it was putting his life in a positive direction, making him more integrated.

**Case 4:** A 27 year old American who worked in a group home characterized his religious background by identifying his mother as "loosely Methodist," and himself as a "spiritual seeker but not a Christian." He had participated in Native American vision questing. He had used LSD, psilocybe mushrooms and MDMA; this was his first ayahuasca experience.

He characterized his motivations for coming as "part of my path. I felt called to come here, my heart was called." He had heard about ayahuasca journeys and during a holotropic breathwork workshop, "I felt called to the plants." His purpose for these sessions was to "find out, to experience the truth of who I am, and in relation to everything I relate to." He felt that the ayahuasca session "teaches me about what it is to be human, exist on the planet. It is a valuable relationship."

**Case 5:** This 54-year-old U.S. citizen was living in a South American country, where he worked as a political risk consultant, screen writer and actor. He was the son of a Christian missionary father and atheist/Jewish mother. He was also an atheist as a child, but that was changed at age 18 with LSD and mushroom experiences that led him to yoga and Buddhist meditation. He later used alcohol and cocaine but had returned to Buddhist practices 15 years previously. He had undertaken advanced study in psychology and therapeutic techniques, and had used many New Age healing practices.

His motivation for coming was to support a significant other who was interested in the experience and to "experience ayahuasca." He didn't come to heal or to search for resolution of something. His early assessment of what he had received from the ayahuasca was "not much fun, too much discomfort," referring to extreme nausea. He called it a generic psychedelic experience, but a lot of suffering for a little effect.

**Case 6:** A U.S. citizen in his 60s lived in a Western state and was a former firefighter and laborer who currently sold crafts he produced. He characterized himself as from a religious family and had an involvement with yoga and Transcendental Meditation earlier in life. He currently was a high ranking official in a conservative church. He had no sense of conflict between ayahuasca use and the church, although he did not want his use known to the church members. He reported using mescaline and LSD for many years, and first used ayahuasca a few years before. He had not been involved in psychotherapy or counseling.

His motivation for this experience was to "become an evolved god. On ayahuasca I feel like I am a god. Ayahuasca gives me the opportunity to act like God, experience heaven on earth. Ayahuasca is training to be a god." He felt that because of ayahuasca he had become an "evolved god" and had been aided in his search for immortality. With ayahuasca he received a means to verify what he already knew, the proof. Before he lived by faith but now he had sure knowledge. He felt that ayahuasca made him an exemplary participant in doctrinal discussions in his church, providing him with insight to share with others.

**Case 7:** A 50-year-old Venezuelan worked as a political science consultant for a nongovernmental organization. She characterized her family religious background as a conventional Roman Catholic education with nuns. She said her family had very strong beliefs, but that she was not particularly believing. She had not been in counseling. She had begun drug use with marijuana at age 25, and had more recently used LSD, ketamine, MDMA and opium.

Her motivation for coming to the ayahuasca session was "curiosity"; she saw it as a distinct drug that could give her something, and she perceived a cult like mystique surrounding ayahuasca. She saw ayahuasca as "something healthy, not just a drug trip, but something spiritual, transcendent." She was hoping for a cosmological experience, something spiritual, grand and beautiful. She also came for the intellectual component of the program, something that could help her understand the phenomena. What she got out of the program in the initial days was "nothing" and a "bad experience", referring to the nausea and vomiting.

**Case 8:** This participant was a 51-year-old American citizen who worked in nursing and education. Her background was Presbyterian, but she said she was not religious, but "intellectually spiritual." She had done various kinds of therapy—Reike, massage, energy healing, acupuncture—with friends. She had used marijuana, hash, cocaine and LSD many times. She had heard of ayahuasca through the work of Terence McKenna and had first used ayahuasca two years ago.

Her motivation for using ayahuasca was to "find something greater than myself, open my mind, dissolve boundaries, and expand awareness and consciousness." She expressed an existential desire to take advantage of the experiences of the body on earth to get beyond the material limits, to look for answers. She hoped that the ayahuasca experiences would "give answers as to what to do next . . . expand her mind and consciousness beyond the limits of culture," and help her "learn about reality and evolve." What she has received from her ayahuasca experiences is the realization that "ayahuasca is a friend that you can work with." She felt that she had also learned that you don't have to try to be what others expect. She had received clarity, awareness and was learning not to judge.

**Case 9:** A 41-year-old woman from New York was working as a drug abuse counselor using acupuncture for detoxification. She was raised as a Unitarian, but was not a regular churchgoer. Her therapeutic experiences had included holistic therapies, breath work, body work, craniofacial therapy, massage, grieving therapy and acupuncture. She had used marijuana, LSD, mushrooms, peyote (mostly when young), and more recently ayahuasca with a Shuar group in Ecuador.

Her motivation for attending this ayahuasca seminar included the academic component to the conference and the artist workshops. She also wanted to meet people from other cultures who were interested in using ayahuasca. This particular workshop appealed to her because of the dietary and alcohol restrictions, which had not been part of the previous ayahuasca seminar she had attended. She also spoke of a spiritual motivation in her presence, to explore her personal relationship to the universe, the plant kingdom, to connect with the spirits and plant energies. She spoke of her experiences as "wonderful, deep, beyond expectations."

**Case 10:** This 26-year-old bartender from Hawaii characterized himself as an "underground psychologist." He was raised Catholic but stopped church participation at age 12. He said he was not interested in organized religion, but was engaged in a personal spiritual search. He had not participated in counseling or therapy. He had used mushrooms, Ecstasy, Salvia Divinorum, and most other psychoactive substances; he characterized himself as a "psychonaut," and characterized ayahuasca (which he had used once before) and other substances as "a shortcut to the mind phenomena and visions."

His motivations for attending were to learn a scientific point of view about ayahuasca and to have the opportunity for personal use that would help him "get into a state of spirituality." What he had received from the ayahuasca sessions were visions and other experiences that helped him learn about himself—but he wished to keep those personal insights to himself. He added "ayahuasca has given me perceptions that there is more to them than just a chemical process. There is another reality that we can step into and out of. That spirit reality seems much more real now."

**Case 11:** This 40-year-old English citizen was working as a piano teacher. His family background was Jewish but he characterized himself as "lapsed." Religion had little relevance for him now and there were no other spiritual traditions in his life (except anthroposophy). He had done some therapeutic work—Reichian work, some psychoanalysis and some work with the Bon traditions of Tibet. He had no previous drug experiences, not even marijuana. He had developed an interest in ayahuasca through reading about it.

His motivation for coming to the ayahuasca seminar was his intuition that ayahuasca could give him important information pertaining to family issues, his future path, and his career. He hoped to get a wider philosophical and spiritual understanding, a different mindset, and address some personal problems. He was attracted to this seminar in particular by its "non-touristic nature. I didn't just want a 'trip,' I wanted to be with genuine seekers." He felt he had received a "tremendous variety of perspectives . . . a clearer understanding of how

I was brought up, the effects of the mindsets of parents, family and social environment." He also felt he had a clear understanding of "what to do in the future, where I am going." He felt that the session had helped him discover personal qualities that were producing a dramatic shift in him, allowing him "to let go of issues." He also felt he had received a "physical healing," with ayahuasca directly working out physical and emotional problems and helping him sort out personal issues.

**Case 12:** A 71-year-old Belgium national living in England was a retired physician and psychologist. He was raised as a Catholic and considered himself to have been deeply spiritual as a child, but had lost touch with that. He had gone through brief periods of therapy, including hypnosis, and some intensive long-term primal therapy and arc intensive therapy. He had not used psychedelic drugs, but had experienced natural states of transcendence. He became interested in ayahuasca after hearing about it in the press and on scientific medical networks.

His motivation for attending the seminar was to overcome self-destructive addictive patterns (involving alcohol) that were holding him back. He wanted to experience ayahuasca to "deal with unfinished stuff" and to "get rid of frustration, break out of constraints, and get in touch with the transpersonal." He felt that he had not experienced much benefits yet, that the "benefits will be seen later." He also offered that the session had provoked him to "reconsider what I am all about, supposed to be and do" and offered that he would know more about the benefits later.

**Case 13:** A 58-year-old Canadian was a former dancer and actress currently working as an intuitive consultant and workshop leader for psychic development. The daughter of Protestant missionary parents in China, she began to question her given religion at age 12. LSD subsequently freed her from Protestantism and led her to Zen Buddhism. She is a natural clairvoyant who worked as a channeler for a renegade Catholic priest in Brazil. She has never been in therapy but had training as a rebirthing therapist. She had used LSD and marijuana a little in her twenties, and later some mescaline, Ecstasy and cocaine.

Her motivation for attending the workshop began with word of mouth recommendations from friends who knew the workshop leader and his personal style. She decided to come to the seminar to find a new direction in life, "to get a big blast to overcome the blockages." She said she "felt that ayahuasca would push her forward to the next phase, create a movement within the self." She felt that she got a lot from the ayahuasca, beginning with a sense of completion in dealing with pain from the past, resolving pain from her mother and other family issues that she had not integrated. She said that she had worked through some death issues. "Now I can embrace life in a new way. I came to a sense of who I really am," she said. "I see the emergence of a beautiful goddess." She confessed to having "given myself away early in life, losing control to others who induced feelings of guilt. Now I am recovering myself from a deeper place that never really fully unfolded." She said that she had a vision of a new place in life, being better able to deal with anxiety and not being afraid to be true to her self and express it.

**Case 14:** This 50-year-old musician from New York was also a channeler-medium and author of a book on spirit mediumship. He had been raised as a strict Roman Catholic but felt that there was something wrong with it. When he was young (in the 1970s), he had experimented with LSD, mescaline and marijuana but had not used drugs much.

His motivation for taking ayahuasca was to facilitate his development of spirit mediumship, particularly "a direct independent voice." "The path of ayahuasca is a spiritual path" he offered. He characterized his experiences as "beyond description," and involving "speaking directly to infinite spirit."

**Case 15:** This Japanese fashion designer had been brought up in Zen Shu traditions, but did not participate in psychotherapy. She had a few drug experiences with LSD, Ecstasy and marijuana, and one experience with ayahuasca with the Santo Daime group in Japan. She was hoping that ayahuasca would give her more imagination, a new direction in life, a "the power to see inside myself." She also thought that ayahuasca would help her stop drinking alcohol.

What she had received from ayahuasca was meditation, thinking and insight. "I get focus on insights and feel calm." She did not receive any new direction from her experiences, but she did not drink beer while attending. "For the first time in 12 years, I'm not drinking two to three beers a day." She said that she thinks that she would not drink alcohol so much from now on. She now felt more in control. "With the ayahuasca my higher self is stronger. Now if I want to cry, laugh or dance, I can do it. I can decide now how I feel." She adds "now it seems like maybe I know everything. I can control everything myself. Before I worried about losing control."

**Case 16:** A 40-year-old male film producer from New York declared himself to not have a religious background nor to have participated in therapy. He had not taken ayahuasca before, but had used marijuana and hashish.

He characterized his motivations by saying "I came to see free pictures, to see the visuals, the amazing things." He added "I wanted to see what influence this could have on my work." When asked what he had achieved through the sessions he said: "I need time to assimilate this, think and meditate, to assimilate this. I am already very visual but I didn't see that much more. What I got was fun out of this."