

THE EFFECTS OF PARTICIPATION IN AYAHUASCA RITUALS
ON GAYS' AND LESBIANS' SELF PERCEPTION

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ABSTRACT

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The practice of drinking the psychoactive drink ayahuasca has been shown in several studies to have positive long-term effects on mental states, and several studies have suggested it has a particularly strong positive effect on perceptions of identity. This research sought to discover if and in what way, these previous findings would be seen in gay people, who are often taught by their culture and religion that their lifestyles, values and sexual orientation are unacceptable. This qualitative study examined the interview responses of 17 gay and lesbian-identified participants who had used ayahuasca in a group in the past three years regarding their self-perceptions. The results indicated that all participants reported positive effects on their lives from ayahuasca rituals, including affirmation of their sexual orientation, and no participants reported negative effects on perception of identity.

KEYWORDS: Identity, Hallucinogenic drugs, Homosexuality, Religious practices

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to Randy Barbato and Bia Labate.

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Chapter I

Introduction

The use of ayahuasca (eye-ah-WAS-ka) for personal exploration, physical and emotional healing, and religious practice has grown recently both in the United States and worldwide, expanding from its traditional roots in South America to become a global phenomenon (Luna, 2003). Currently, thousands of people drink ayahuasca throughout the world, either as ayahuasca tourists in South America, as adherents of the two international ayahuasca churches, Santo Daime and União de Vegetal, or their numerous local offshoots and variations. People also drink the beverage in more esoteric groups and smaller circles interested in self-knowledge and personal exploration, or as practitioners in who work with shamans who travel to their countries (Metzner, 1999).

The name “ayahuasca” is a Quechua term for “vine of the soul.” It has many other names, including “yage,” “hoasca,” “caapi” and “pinde” (Shultes, 1992). It is said to provide “telepathy” to its users, to heal physical and psychological wounds, and to grant religious visions. The experiences of people who drink ayahuasca are often life changing, and have been said to include cures for drug addiction (Mabit, 1996; Labate, Guimarães dos Santos, Anderson, Mercante, & Barbosa, 2010) and depression as well as physical illnesses (Palladino, 2009; Sulla, 2005). Intense emotions and experiences in which participants feel they are dying are common, but also viewed as part of the healing process. Ayahuasca can have profound effects upon users, and can change the way they view the world and themselves even after the ceremonies are

concluded. Ayahuasca produces psychological effects that can be profound, and can address the user's identity, origin, or purpose (Shanon, 2010). These benefits are of great importance to all people, but have a special meaning for gays and lesbians. Sexual minorities are often told that part of their essential identity is flawed or sinful, and such perceptions can lead to personal crisis that can result in self-destructive behavior, including addictions, depression and suicide (Comstock, 1996; Haas et al., 2011).

Because ayahuasca often provides insight and new perspectives, this research explores if, and in what ways, gay and lesbian people's experiences with ayahuasca have affected their perception of their roles and identity as sexual minorities. While gay and lesbian people may have intense spiritual lives, participation in religious life has been more difficult because of the social exclusion of gays and lesbians and religious proscriptions against homosexuality. The insights gained from exploring this topic will be potentially useful in gaining a better understanding of the accommodations and interpretations gay and lesbian people make to find their place in religious community and within religious and spiritual philosophy.

Participation in mainstream religious activities can often raise issues of identity and self-acceptance for gay people. Because ayahuasca engenders intense self-examination and perspectival shifts, these issues of identity, which are hallmarks of all religions, come to the forefront. This research investigates the impact of ritual ayahuasca use on these perceptions of identity; how may it transform, reinforce or allow the drinker to transcend them.

The spiritual experiences of gay people have been marginalized by the predominant heterocentric culture of the world (Buchanan, Dzelme, Harris, & Hecker, 2001). Questions that were explored in this study include how gays and lesbians have reconciled themselves to the negative views on gays present in the organized Christian ayahuasca churches and whether church teachings and societal messages create cognitive dissonance when gays and lesbians explore their identity while under the effects of ayahuasca. The research also explored whether ayahuasca has an effect on internalized homophobia. Participants were questioned about their relationships with people in the ayahuasca group they drink with and any feelings of discomfort or affirmation they experienced as a result of their sexual orientation in this company. Another focus was also on how gays and lesbians integrate their ayahuasca experiences with the rest of their lives. The experience of these participants was explored in regard to their perceptions of the effect of their participation in ayahuasca rituals on their own identity, effects on spirituality, life, sexuality, and aspects that create discomfort. Other questions helped define preferences, develop the stories being told, and asked about meaning the participants perceived (Buchanan et al., 2001).

Content analysis was used to codify and then extract themes from the responses to a semi-structured interview with a selection of seventeen gay and lesbian people who have used ayahuasca in a variety of formats with at least one other person within the past three years. The presence of at least one other person creates the most elemental form of “community,” which is one of the variables explored.

Psychologist Michael White remarked on the importance of telling the stories of those whose views are seldom heard. Individually, White says that we “prune” our stories to fit with the stories others have about us, so that many parts of stories that do not fit in with the dominant culture go untold (White, 1990).

Gay and lesbian people have received many negative projections from the dominant culture. Ayahuasca use is also controversial, with limited legal protection and is unknown or misunderstood by most North Americans (Meyer, 2009). The people who are both gay or lesbian and using ayahuasca can be subject to misunderstanding by the larger society they live in and by both the gay community and the community or group that they use ayahuasca with. Because ayahuasca strongly affects spiritual perceptions (Kjellgren, Eriksson, & Norlander, 2009; Trichter, Klimo, & Krippner, 2009), the responses to these questions help show how these narratives are intertwined and what realizations or accommodations gay and lesbian ayahuasca users have made in their stories to make sense of their experiences.

Participants were sought who had drunk ayahuasca in organized religions, in groups lead by a shaman, or in other independent groups. Some questions this research seeks to answer include; do gay, lesbian and bisexual people perceive something is amiss or wrong when they contemplate their lives in the context of an entheogenic spiritual or religious ceremony? Or, do they have a different experience of their selves when in states of altered consciousness? What might these perceptions tell us about how gay people construct their ideas of self in the context of their religious or spiritual pursuits and community participation?

Recent legalization of the use of ayahuasca in the U.S.A. in the União de Vegetal's services in the Supreme Court case of *Gonzales v. O Centro Espirita Beneficente União Do Vegetal*, (546 U.S. 418, 2006), and the even more recent success of Santo Daime in the Oregon State courts opens the door to a greater public awareness and interest in ayahuasca. In the past ten years, research on ayahuasca has multiplied exponentially (Labate, Guimaraes dos Santos, Santana de Rose & Derix, 2007). The review of literature will give an overview of the extent of these studies. The experiences of some gay and lesbian people may have been included in some of these studies, but it was not noted. This common oversight contributes to the invisibility that gays and lesbians feel when encountering media and institutions that ignore their experience.

The oppression of gay and lesbian people very often has a religious justification (Comstock, 1996). The new syncretic religions that have formed around the ayahuasca tea have, to a greater or lesser degree, integrated ideas of Christianity that condemn gay people, the UDV issuing policy statements against gay marriage and homosexuality (UDV Policy Document, 2008) and Santo Daime bearing the strong influence of folk Catholicism and its conservative cultural views (Silva Sa, 2010). These religions have been formed only in the past century and are in an evolutionary process as they expand and become international. As the use of ayahuasca has spread, the cultural trappings and beliefs connected to its use have been carried to new lands from the South American jungles. Among these beliefs are ideas about the roles of men and women, and other values that are transmitted through cultural praxis. The

practice of using ayahuasca for worship or healing has spread to countries with cultural values very different from those of the indigenous tribes or the Catholic Latin American countries it originated in (Labate & Jungerberle, in press; Tupper, 2009). This dissertation will explore how gay men and lesbians are impacted by the influence of these cultures on their ayahuasca rituals.

This research will examine the experiences of gay and lesbian people who have used ayahuasca in various settings, and the effects these experiences have had on their perceptions of their own identity. This research will be of value to clinicians and scholars who seek to understand more about how gay and lesbian people perceive their identity. It will help psychologists understand how experiences of altered consciousness can affect psychological adjustment. This study will be of interest to scholars of religious psychology and those interested in new religious movements and the motives of the people who join them. Finally, this research may benefit gay and lesbian ayahuasca users who wish to learn about and compare the experiences of others like themselves.

Review of the Literature

Recently, the study of ayahuasca use in many forms has created a wide body of literature that has put this shamanic sacrament under a scientific gaze. This review of the literature will show the wide range of topics related to ayahuasca that have been researched and explored in papers and books, and it will also reveal the lack of any scientific study of the population of gay and lesbian users. As a result of years of oppression, many times by religious institutions, gay and lesbian people have a unique perspective on spirituality and religion (Schneider, 2000). This review will look at the studies that have involved gay people and psychedelics, and touch upon the relationship of gay people to religion. Because of the tendency of ayahuasca to incite religious or spiritual feelings (Krippner & Sulla, 2000), research into the experiences of gay and lesbian ayahuasca users can help show how this minority understands issues of identity and spiritual development. A review of topics pertinent to the research, including introduction of ayahuasca to the “West,” the nature of the effect of ayahuasca and practices related to its use, research on gay and lesbian people’s experience with psychedelics, and research on the experiences of gay and lesbian people in religious environments and will be covered.

New Research on Psychedelics

In the past ten years, research on psychedelics, including ayahuasca, has expanded with studies on the many aspects of its effects and communities of

users. The word “psychedelic” can be translated from the Latin root as meaning “mind manifesting” and was coined by Humphrey Osmond in the 1950, who further defined it as having the central quality of “enhancement of experience” (Aaronson & Osmond, 1970, p. 9). The term psychedelic refers, in the case of substances, to those which have a sensory or psychological effect, which can include religious experiences, while “entheogen” refers to those substances which generate spiritual feelings or which are used in religious contexts (Roberts, 2009). There are both artificial and natural entheogens. Artificial entheogens include Ketamine, MDMA, and LSD. Natural entheogens include peyote, iboga, marijuana, psilocybin, and ayahuasca (Tupper, 2002). Another name for some of these substances is “entactogen,” substances that induce a deep change in feeling (Blackmore, 2006). Many of the natural entheogens have had spiritual practices evolve around their use. Indigenous people have used natural entheogens for centuries to achieve states of altered consciousness (Dobkin de Rios, 1990). Such substances have been used in ritual context for healing and other purposes, including initiation, contacting the dead, locating lost items, and sorcery (Metzner, 1999). Entheogens have been used to treat psychological problems in traditional societies where it is understood that such problems are caused by spirits or sorcery (Weiskopf, 2005). It appears that these substances often had a significant role in the spiritual and medicinal practices of these cultures. In modern times, this use has transformed into the concept of “Psychedelic healing” (D. Brown, 2007; Goldsmith, 2011) in which personal insights into psychological or even physical trauma can be resolved through the use of these plants and

substances. Strassman (2001) believes that a deep understanding of and training in religious sensibilities is essential for anyone supervising experimental psychedelic research.

Early research into psychedelics for treatment of depression and alcoholism in the sixties was suppressed when recreational users began to have negative experiences (Dobkin de Rios & Janiger, 2003). However, in recent years, the U.S. government has begun to permit research into these psychedelic substances purported to have therapeutic potential (W. A. Brown, 2007). In the United States and Israel 3,4-Methylenedioxymethamphetamine, or MDMA, also known as “ecstasy” is being studied for its properties for healing trauma (Parrott, 2007). In Switzerland, Lysergic acid diethylamide, or LSD, is being tested as a treatment for anxiety in cancer patients (Gasser & Speich, 2007). In Canada, ibogaine is being assessed as treatment for opiate dependence (Doblin, Alper, & Martin, 2006). In studies conducted at the University of Arizona, obsessive-compulsive disorder is being treated with psilocybin (Hayes, 2007). In Russia, Ketamine is being used to assist in psychotherapy with drug addicts, and has been found to have strong anti-depressant qualities (D. Brown, 2007). Despite the trend in psychedelic studies, government-approved research on ayahuasca in the United States has not yet commenced. However, clinical research on DMT (N, N-dimethyltryptamine), one of the principle psychoactive ingredients in ayahuasca, was carried out at the University of New Mexico from 1990 to 1995 (Strassman, 2001). More recently, a protocol to study the neurochemistry and psychological and physical effects of ayahuasca has been proposed by Dr. Leanna

Standish (Labate & Cavnar, 2011). Despite the lack of government-sponsored experimental research on ayahuasca, its use is spreading and researchers have applied a number of psychological tests to users to determine both its long and short-term effects.

The “Discovery” of Ayahuasca

Ayahuasca is the name of a woody vine that is native to South and Central America, as well as the name of the psychotropic tea created when the vine is brewed with admixtures (Shanon, 2006). The origin of the use of ayahuasca in rituals is unknown. Its use was widespread in the Amazon Basin in the mid 19th century as recorded by ethnographers, but there is little evidence to prove a longer history (McKenna, 2004). Some speculate based on archeological evidence that the origins of ayahuasca go back thousands of years (Dobkin de Rios & Rumrill, 2008) as it is present in the origin myths of several tribes of Indians in South America. Ayahuasca originated in the Amazon where the plants necessary for its creation grow. In indigenous cultures of the Amazon, ayahuasca has allegedly been used to prophesize the future, to communicate with spirits and the dead, for sorcery, to locate lost items, to obtain divine guidance, artistic inspiration and for diagnosing and healing (Luna, 2003). Ayahuasca is currently used among non-indigenous people for personal exploration, worship, healing, aesthetic pleasure and inspiration, communication with the spirit world, and as part of the reinforcement of social communities formed around the use of the drink (Dobkin de Rios & Grob, 2005; Shanon, 2002). The experiences of people who drink

ayahuasca are reportedly often life changing, and can include cures for drug addiction (Mabit, 1996; Labate et al., 2010) and depression (Metzner, 1998).

Only residents of the Amazon knew of ayahuasca until it was reported to the scientific world by English botanist Richard Spruce, who observed the Tukano Indians in Brazil drink the tea in 1851. He identified the vine used in the brew as *Banisteris caapi*. The name was changed to *Banisteriopsis caapi* in 1931 during a re-classification of the plant species. Henceforth in this document, “*B. caapi*” will be used to refer to the ayahuasca plant to avoid confusion with the tea.

Spruce did not report his findings until 1873. In 1858, Manuel Villavicencio, an Ecuadorian geographer, published his reports on the Indians in the Rio Napo area drinking ayahuasca, becoming the first scientist to publish a report (McKenna, 1998).

The *Banisteriopsis caapi* vine used to make ayahuasca contains monoamine oxidase inhibitors (MAOIs), and the leaves from *Psychotria viridis* contain DMT, which is found in many plants and in trace amounts in animals and humans. DMT becomes orally active when combined with the MAOI. This gives the drinker an experience characterized by visions of color followed by revelations, perceptions of meetings with spirit beings, deep emotional processing, and other perceptual and emotional phenomena (Shanon, 2003).

DMT is a chemical often, but not always, found in the traditional ayahuasca brews. The *Psychotria viridis* leaves used in the tea have high concentrations of DMT. They are said to provide the “light” to the “force” of the *B. caapi* vine when cooked with it (Metzner, 1999). The brew made by the

ayahuasca churches always consists of only the *B. caapi* vine and the leaves of the *Psychotria viridis* tree, but shamans may use many other ingredients, including plants from the *Solanacea* (nightshade) family, which can alter and intensify the experience. However, additives do not affect the main action of DMT metabolizing due to MAO inhibition (Calloway, 1999).

Manske first synthesized DMT in 1931, but the psychedelic properties of DMT were not known until 1946, when Brazilian Goncalves de Lima extracted DMT from the drink “Jurema,” a mind-altering tea used by Brazilian Indians similar to ayahuasca that is made from the *Mimosa hostilis* tree. He named the compound “nigerine,” a name that was not generally adopted for DMT (Ott, 1994). His work was followed by other research by Fish, Johnson and Horning (1955) who published a paper on DMT in snuffs used by South American Indians. Hearing of this research, a Hungarian scientist, Stephen Szara, synthesized DMT in his laboratory and tried ingesting it. He experienced no effects because MAO in his stomach broke down the DMT before it could reach his brain. In oral ingestion of synthetic DMT, as well as in ayahuasca tea, an accompanying MAO inhibitor must be added to make it active. Szara then tried injecting it, and began the first psychedelic research on DMT when he experienced a hallucinatory “trip” lasting about one hour (Strassman, 2001).

Two of the first reporters to tell the literary world about the mystery of ayahuasca were the gay “beat” authors William Burroughs and Alan Ginsberg who published letters and descriptions of experiences drinking with shamans in the Amazon in a book entitled *The Yage Letters* (Burroughs & Ginsburg, 1963).

Burroughs and Ginsburg (1963) reported somewhat negative and difficult experiences, and this did not inspire widespread interest in ayahuasca experimentation among readers. It was the use of psilocybin mushrooms that inspired Timothy Leary to appreciate the potential of mind-altering agents to transform psychological and spiritual awareness (Stevens, 1987), and the subsequent era of LSD and of psychedelic experimentation in the 1960's rarely included ayahuasca.

Research on the Chemistry and Effects of Ayahuasca

DMT is from the family of tryptamines, a chemical group that is derived from L-tryptophan, an amino acid. Other psychedelic compounds are formed from the tryptamine group including LSD, psilocybin, ibogaine and a host of others. The psychoactive nature of many of the tryptamines may be due to their similarities to the structure of serotonin (5-HT), another tryptamine (Calloway, 1999). Serotonin affects many areas of human behavior, and most significantly has a relationship to sleep and depression (Preston, O'Neal, & Talaga, 2008). Antidepressants in the class called "MAO Inhibitors" prevent the monoamine oxidase from catabolizing serotonin, and the flood of serotonin that results may help alleviate depression. There is often an elevation in mood after an ayahuasca experience which has been attributed to the MAO inhibition and resulting serotonergic surge (Metzner, 1999).

The "Hoasca Study" done in 1996 examined the mental health of 15 male volunteer members of the União de Vegetal (U.D.V.), one of the international ayahuasca churches, using the Tridimensional Personality Questionnaire

(McKenna, Calloway, & Grob, 1998). Results showed U.D.V. members scored more items revealing stoic rigidity versus explorational excitability, greater regimentation versus disorderliness, greater reflection versus impulsivity, greater confidence versus fear of uncertainty, more gregariousness versus shyness and more optimism versus anticipatory worry. It should be noted that some of these effects might be due to involvement in a strong religious community regardless of ayahuasca consumption. Nevertheless, the regular use of ayahuasca was not shown to have any negative effect on the mental health of the participants. The mental health of ayahuasca drinkers has also been analyzed using the MMPI (Surprise, 2007). No significant differences on MMPI scores were found between regular users of ayahuasca and non-users.

In 2010, research examining the mental health of long-term users of ayahuasca (at least 15 years of use, four times or more a month) in Santo Daime and Barquinha churches was done in Brazil by Spanish psychiatrist J.M. Fábregas and a team of researchers (Fábregas et al., 2010). This study included a one-year follow-up assessment. Researchers found that ayahuasca users scored significantly lower on measures of psychiatric, substance abuse, and health problems. One important finding was that long-term users did not exhibit any signs of neurological impairment as measured by tests of executive functioning, which suggested a lack of neurotoxicity.

Research on 32 members of a Santo Daime community in Oregon (Halpern, Sherwood, Passie, Blackwell, & Ruttenber, 2008) found that the members perceived improved health and relationships, increased mental clarity

and sense of purpose. Results were measured with the Structured Clinical Interview for DSM Disorders (First, Spitzer, Gibbons, & Williams, 2002), the Hamilton Anxiety Rating Scale (Hamilton, 1959) and the Hamilton Depression Rating Scale (Hamilton, 1960), the Symptom Check List Revised (Derogatis, 1977), the Uplifts and Hassles Questionnaire (Lazarus & Folkman, 1989) and the Wender Utah Rating Scale (Ward, Wender, & Reimherr, 1993). As with other studies on these religious groups, results were likely due not only to the effects of the ayahuasca drink, but also reflected regular church attendance and a strong community of believers, factors that can have positive effects of their own.

A study carried out in the United Kingdom of ayahuasca drinkers who drank in Santo Daime rituals looked at the beneficial and negative effects of ayahuasca use, the effect of ayahuasca on awareness, modification of values and behavior, and ayahuasca as a “teacher and discipline,” using semi-structured interviews. The researchers found that “participation in ayahuasca rituals can facilitate an expansion of the usual boundaries of personality, allowing experience of the intuitive and healing parts of the self that can help a person fulfilling potentialities and resolving blockages” (Villaescusa, 2002, p.37). Villaescusa referred to ayahuasca as “indigenous psychotherapy” (although it is not reported that indigenous people themselves think of it that way) and found negative effects to consist mostly of exaggeration of the ego in which drinkers may become narcissistic and unwilling to listen to others’ points of view, having seen “the truth” for him or herself.

Another study of psychological aspects of ayahuasca by Santos, Landeira-Fernandez, Strassman, Motta, and Cruz (2007) included examinations of its effect on anxiety and despair. In this study, questionnaires were distributed to members of the Santo Daime church one hour after ingestion of ayahuasca in a double-blind placebo controlled conditions. Ayahuasca was found to be associated with lower levels of panic and hopelessness.

In a study on ayahuasca's effects on teenagers (Doering-Silveira et al., 2005), it was found that the teenagers who regularly drank ayahuasca in the context of União de Vegetal ceremonies scored lower on tests of anxiety, body dysmorphia, and attention problems than the control group of other teenagers in their communities in Brazil. They also reported lower levels of illegal substance abuse and alcohol use. Once again, results need to be interpreted in the light of the benefits that may arise from participation in any strong religious group practice, and may not be completely attributable to ingestion of ayahuasca.

The effect of ayahuasca on intelligence was discussed by Tupper (2002) in his paper "Entheogens and Existential Intelligence: The Use of Plant Teachers as Cognitive Tools." He proposed that ayahuasca increases a quality he calls "existential intelligence," which is taken from Gardner's (1983) theory of multiple intelligences. Existential intelligence, as described by Gardner, is characterized by an increased ability to appreciate the paradoxes that exist in human life, and a cross-cultural awareness of the spiritual depths and contradictions that have been the source of religious and philosophical speculation throughout human history (Tupper, 2002). Tupper speculated on a future role for

ayahuasca similar to that in some indigenous cultures, as an initiatory rite into adulthood from adolescence, as both a learning experience and an introduction to a tool which may provide a more cosmic understanding of humanity's place in the world.

The research on ayahuasca has sometimes been funded by groups interested in proving the safety and benefits of ayahuasca for legal or political reasons. For example, União de Vegetal sponsored the Hoasca study (Grob & McKenna, 1994), and members of Santo Daime have produced research supporting the healing properties of the brew (Sulla, 2005; McCrae, 1992). The dangers in using ayahuasca lie mostly in combining it with selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs) or medicinal MAOIs. A condition known as "serotonin syndrome" may develop (Calloway, 1999). Nausea, fever, diarrhea, and uncoordinated movements leading to coma and possible death are symptomatic of serotonin syndrome.

In a review and analysis of the literature conducted to define any negative physiological effects of ayahuasca ingestion, Gable (2007) estimated the lethal dose of ayahuasca to be, conservatively, about twenty times the dose ordinarily used in rituals. Gable notes that ayahuasca elevates blood pressure and heart rate, which may result in stroke or heart attack in vulnerable individuals. Another negative reaction to ayahuasca may be that physical discomfort and chronic pain can be exacerbated during an ayahuasca session. Gable found six cases of illness or death as the result of ayahuasca-related compounds, but only one non-fatal instance of serotonin syndrome from the consumption of traditional ayahuasca,

and that was from use in combination with fluoxetine (Prozac). However, a recent report (Labate, 2010) noted that the UDV had not reported any problems with members who had been using antidepressants with ayahuasca. The negative reactions Gable notes were the result of mixing tobacco into the ayahuasca, resulting in nicotine poisoning, the use of *Pegnum harmala* seeds in place of *B. caapi*, and the use of chemical forms of DMT. Gable was unable to find any deaths as the result of consumption of traditional ayahuasca brew. He notes that the stimulation of the vagus nerve by an excess of serotonin results in emesis that self-regulates the amount of DMT in the body. Gable also notes that the possibility of severe adverse psychological effects from non-ritual use exists. The União de Vegetal has noted between 13 and 24 instances out of 25,000 doses in which an individual may have had an experience of psychosis as the result of ingestion of ayahuasca in UDV ceremonies. All of the reported cases were transient and spontaneously resolved themselves (Gable, 2007). It is widely acknowledged that persons with histories of psychosis should avoid consumption of ayahuasca (Guimarães dos Santos & Strassman, 2011), and most groups have some screening process in place so that individuals with these issues are not put at risk. Gable notes that all published reports of poisoning with ayahuasca-related substances were the result of individuals who made the brew themselves or who ingested it with another psychoactive substance. In his review of the literature, Gable also found no evidence that ayahuasca has any addictive potential.

Ayahwasca, Entheogens, Spirituality and Religion

Currently, thousands of people drink ayahuasca throughout the world, either as ayahuasca tourists in South America (Dobkin de Rios, 2008), as adherents of Santo Daime and União de Vegetal, the two international ayahuasca churches and their offshoots, or as practitioners in smaller religious circles or more esoteric groups who work with shamans (Metzner, 1999). The Santo Daime church itself has about 12,000 members worldwide, in South America, Europe, Brazil, Japan, South Africa, and the Middle East. The União de Vegetal has about 16,000 members (Luna, 2007).

The ayahuasca brew has inspired religions, but even those who do not practice or believe in a religion can have spiritual experiences as the result of drinking ayahuasca (Shanon, 2006). Moberg (2002) defined the term “spirituality” as describing activities and beliefs that are experienced in relation to a divine being, or to some transcendent reality, noting that spirituality may include experiences of unifying energy, personal mysticism or experiences that are perceived to have a sacred meaning. Another definition is “the self’s existential search for ultimate meaning through an individualized understanding of the sacred” (Wink & Dillon, 2002, p. 79). Religious experiences are usually perceived within the context of some structure of dogma and creation that, in addition to having an overt spiritual element, may also serve community or political functions, is hierarchical, and includes group rituals. Religion is transmitted in symbols and rituals that relate one to a cosmic order. While

spirituality can be entirely private, there is a necessary public component to religion (Geertz, 1993).

One striking quality of ayahuasca tea is its tendency to provoke religious visions, or visions that relate to the user's understanding of the nature of reality. Shanon (2002) wrote about the nature of the mystical experience that is often sought by ayahuasca drinkers. He stated that an experience of the Divine is a major motivation for many ayahuasca users. He divided visions experienced on ayahuasca related to religion into two categories: visions that reveal the relationship of the Divine to the universe, and those which reveal the nature of people's relationship to the Divine. While content varied, Shanon found this emphasis on the Divine or spiritual content to be evident across cultures, with modern users and traditional users from North and South America, Europe, the Middle East and Asia having similar experiences. In his research, Shanon posited that experiences of the alteration of time created perceptions of "eternity" and feelings of serenity and sanctity. He also noted that enhanced meaningfulness and the ability to perceive broader and alternate perspectives are characteristic of ayahuasca drinkers' spiritual experiences. Shanon notes seven qualities that are typical of spiritual or religious experiences on ayahuasca: (a) unity (a mystical state of consciousness); (b) transcendence of time and space; (c) noesis (the perception of truth); (d) positive feelings of joy and peace; (e) a sense of sacredness; (f) paradoxicality (defying logic); and (g) ineffability. Shanon said that some of his research participants described a transformation of their identities

into “nothingness,” a process of dis-identifying with the personal self, which they felt caused them to “turn into God.”

Metzner (1999) enumerated ten qualities of the ayahuasca-induced altered state. These included, 1) alterations in thinking, 2) altered time sense, 3) fear of loss of control, 4) changes in emotional expression, 5) changes in body image, 6) perceptual alterations, 7) changes in meaning or significance, 8) sense of the ineffable, 9) feelings of rejuvenation, and 10) hyper-suggestibility. Consistent with the findings of Alper (2006) and Snyder (2006), many of these feelings were those reported by people having ecstatic and mystical religious experiences (James, 1902/1997).

Ott (1994), referring to the growth of ayahuasca churches worldwide, said, “Far from being an aberration or anachronism, these churches...rather represent the future of Christianity, stripped of its Doctrine of Transubstantiation by the Entheogenic Reformation, and with (a) genuine entheogen replacing the placebo sacrament” (p.11).

Empirical Investigation on Entheogens and Spirituality

Some exploration has been made in understanding the relationship between entheogens and religious experience. Pahnke’s (1962) “Good Friday Experiment” was an attempt to quantify religious experience inspired by psilocybin administered to seminary students during the course of a sermon in church on Good Friday. Twenty-four years after the experience, an attempt was made to follow up on the original participants (Doblin, 1991). Seventy nine percent of the participants reported that this experience was one of the five most

important experiences of their lives, and thirty percent of all participants said it was *the* most significant experience of their lives. There were some negative effects on some of the participants, including one whose experience was so negative he refused to participate in follow up interviews, but most felt it was a positive experience of lasting value (Doblin, 1991).

More recent research on psilocybin mushrooms (Griffiths, Richards, McCann, & Jesse, 2006) has found that descriptions of the experience of mushroom intoxication were similar to spontaneously occurring mystic states. Participants, who were “hallucinogenically naïve” and who all participated in regular religious or spiritual activities, rated the mushroom experience as having substantial spiritual and personal significance, reporting they felt they had made positive changes in their lives as a result of the experience. Outside raters who knew the participants confirmed the impressions of the volunteers indicating that they had indeed made positive changes in their lives subsequent to taking the mushrooms.

Researchers Krippner and Sulla (2000) attempted to find ways to identify and codify the spiritual content from reports made of experiences with ayahuasca. Searching for “spiritual content” using the Casto Spirituality Scoring System (Casto, 1999) the researchers looked for times when participants reported contact with God, a higher or greater reality, and times when they felt that their identity was expanded or times when they felt they had encountered a sacred realm or gone beyond the parameters of space and time. Krippner and Sulla (2000) found ample evidence of spiritual content when they examined the reports of ayahuasca

experience. Trichter et al. (2009) researched the effects of ayahuasca on spirituality and mystical experience in first-time ayahuasca users, and found an overall increase in spirituality as measured using the qualitative interviews with the Peak Experience Profile (Di Leo, 1982), the Spiritual Well-Being Scale (Ellison, 1983) and the Mysticism Scale (Hill & Hood, 1999).

Speculation on Entheogens and the Origin of Religion

In his book on entheogens, Smith (2000) estimated that one fourth to one third of the general population will have a religious experience if given an entheogen in a supportive but non-religious environment. If a person already has a strong religious orientation, that percentage rises to three fourths, and if the entheogens are given in a religious setting, nine out of ten strongly religious people will have a religious experience. This estimate was made by looking at the statements of 337 participants in three LSD studies, including a group of 69 religious professionals, and measuring the degree to which these groups perceived their experiences in a religious way.

There has been some speculation that religions of antiquity were based on entheogen-inspired revelations. Wasson et al. suggests that the origins of religion are to be found in entheogenic mushroom experiences with *Amanita muscaria* (Wasson, Kramisch, Ott, & Ruck 1986). McKenna proposed a similar beginning to religions in his book *Food of the Gods: The Search for the Original Tree of Knowledge: A Radical History of Plants, Drugs and Human Evolution* (1992). Alex Polari, a leader of the Santo Daime church, has posited that religions were invented after entheogenic experiences (Polari, 1996). Smith also published a

similar theory in *Cleansing the doors of perception* (2003). Shanon (2002) speculates that entheogenic substances inspired many Biblical revelations.

Neurochemistry and Psychedelic Spirituality

Numerous “trip reports” regarding ayahuasca exist in which personal encounters with “the Divine” are recounted (Metzner, 2000). Strassman (2001), in his book *DMT: The Spirit Molecule*, proposes that the experience of religious affect reported so often during sessions with ayahuasca is the effect of DMT in the brain. Strassman maintained that DMT has a natural source in the human brain in the pineal gland. He believes that the location of the pineal gland near the auditory sensory relay centers and its proximity to the limbic system make it a likely candidate for the endogenous production of DMT. He notes the pineal gland’s natural protection from disturbance, by virtue of its position in the center of the brain. This protection keeps the release of DMT at manageable levels, mostly unaffected by all but the most dramatic life situations, such as birth, death, and sexual orgasm. He suggested that DMT is responsible for spiritual experiences in humans, and that its production is increased in times of stress. Religious practices of fasting and mortification increase stress and can lead to heightened spiritual feelings.

Scientific testing has revealed a possible link in brain function connecting the effects of ayahuasca use and the emotional centers of the forebrain. Regional cerebral blood flow to the brain was measured to ascertain the areas of the brain that ayahuasca affects (Riba et al., 2006). Using Blood Perfusion Single Photon Emission Tomography (SPECT), Low Resolution Electromagnetic Tomography

(LORETA) and Positron Emission Tomography (PET), it was found that the frontal and paralimbic areas of the brain were activated, with increased blood flow in the anterior cingulate/frontomedial cortex of the right hemisphere and the anterior insula. Increased blood flow was also found in the left amygdala/parahippocampal gyrus. These brain structures of the limbic forebrain are associated with emotional arousal and subjective feeling states, including a sense of time, insight, and sense of purpose. Alper (2006) suggested these same frontal areas of the brain are central to religious states of mind.

The increase in serotonin as a result of ayahuasca ingestion may also account for sensory alterations and a more fluid concept of the self. Snyder (2006) noted that there is evidence that psychedelic drugs mimic serotonin in the 5HT_{2A,C} receptors. Serotonin is mainly produced in the raphe nuclei, which influence sensory input. Synesthesia, the transferring of information from one sense to another (such as seeing music or hearing colors), may be the result of altered chemistry affecting this area of the brain, and subsequent alteration of ego boundaries could result from the enhancement of or other changes in the evaluation of sensory information. The diffusion of ego boundaries is one element of transcendent mystical states (Stace, 1960; Hood, 1976).

Ayahuasca has traditionally been said to give users a glimpse of the death experience. So-called “near-death” experiences have often been tied to religious visions (Lange, Greyson, & Horage, 2004). Alper (2006) recognized near-death experiences as a cross-cultural neurological phenomenon created by the blockage of glutamate to brain receptors. He hypothesized that the perception of great

peace, white lights, and other characteristics of the near-death experience are evolutionary adaptations to extreme stress and trauma, such as one might experience in a life-threatening situation. Alpers suggested there is an evolutionary advantage to religious and spiritual states; these helped early man deal with the anxiety of understanding his mortal condition. Alper believed that humans would be so overwrought at the awareness of their impending death that they could become incapacitated. He theorized that a certitude about a caretaking god and an afterlife allowed humans to continue to live with hope and ambition for the future, and that these religious beliefs are reinforced by phenomena in the brain which can be elicited by fasting, prayer and extreme psychological distress. He reported that the temporal lobes of the brain can be stimulated electrically to produce religious and spiritual feelings, and that certain types of temporal lobe epilepsy predispose individuals to ecstatic religious experiences.

Ayahuasca Religious Practices Today

Several religious practices have formed around the use of the ayahuasca drink, some with strong Christian dogma. A body of literature has accumulated examining various aspects of these new religions. In the past ten years, research on ayahuasca has multiplied enormously (Labate et al., 2007). These churches are syncretic, variously incorporating beliefs from indigenous Amazon Indians, African Orixas (gods of the elements), Christian beliefs in Jesus, and the spiritist beliefs of Allan Kardec (Dobkin de Rios, 1992), among others. In Santo Daime rituals, participants dress in ritual uniforms and dance and sing from *hinarios*,

which are collections of sacred songs said to be received from the astral (Labate, 2010).

Santo Daime was founded in the city of Rio Branco in the state of Acre, in Brazil, in the 1930's by a seven-foot-tall black rubber tapper from the Northeast of Brazil named Irineu Serra, or "*Mestre Irineu*," who was introduced to the tea by local users who learned of it from the Indians who lived there. After his death, there was a struggle for leadership of the Santo Daime church, and a follower, Sebastião Mota de Melo, or "*Padrinho* (Godfather) Sebastião," started his own branch which he eventually lead away from Rio Branco into the jungle in the State of Amazonas, where he established a settlement, Céu do Mapiá (Heaven of Mapiá) or "Mapiá" (Polari, 1999; MacRae, 1992). This breakaway church and its offshoots came to be known as the *Igreja do Culto Eclético da Fluente Luz Universal Patrono Sebastião Mota de Melo* (ICEFLU [Eclectic Church of Universal Flowing Light of Patron Sebasitão Mota de Melo], formerly CEFLURIS). While the church in Rio Branco known as "Alto Santo" claimed to be the true lineage of Mestre Irineu and was headed by his widow, it remained small and did not welcome outsiders. The church of Padrinho Sebastião welcomed anyone who was interested and soon attracted Brazilian artists, hippies and intellectuals who then spread news of the religion beyond the borders of Brazil, to Boston in the U.S.A. and to Spain in Europe, and from there it spread throughout North America, Europe, to Japan, Israel, South Africa, New Zealand and elsewhere. Sebastião controversially introduced the use of *Cannabis* as a sacrament in the church, alienating the other ayahuasca-using churches that regard

it as a drug (MacRae, 1998; Groisman, 2000). The participants interviewed for this research were all members of this international branch of Santo Daime.

Prayers based on Catholic traditions play a part in all the Santo Daime ceremonies. In these new traditions the focus on power in the shamanic tradition is replaced with Christian ideals such as love for God and charity. The ayahuasca, made in rituals called “*feitios*,” is called “daime,” which means “give me” in Portuguese, and relates to the phrases found in the hymns of Mestre Irineu, “give me love” and “give me light” and the idea that the tea will provide what the seeker seeks. Christian beliefs themselves are altered as they combine with the pre-existing shamanic beliefs, and so, for example, the tea is regarded as the “blood of Christ” and the founder of the church of Santo Daime, Mestre Irineu, is regarded as the reincarnation of Jesus (McCrae, 1998). The combination of Christianity with other forms of spiritual practice loosens the bonds of orthodoxy and opens these syncretic religions to revisions and accommodations based on the needs and world-view of the participants (Soares, 1994).

Mediumship is the practice of incorporating spirits into one’s body in order for them to teach or heal or for the medium to “indoctrinate” suffering spirits into the “light.” Mediumship is considered an act of charity in the Santo Daime religion (Polari de Alverga, 1999). Mediums play a large role in many Santo Daime ceremonies, predominantly in the line of Sebastião in those branches most influenced by Umbanda, another syncretic religion which combines African Yoruba religion with indigenous Brazilian beliefs and Christianity (D. D. Brown, 1986).

The Barquinha church is also characterized by mediumship. Members wear the Barquinha uniforms, designed after sailor uniforms, and dance around an altar. In the União de Vegetal's ceremonies, mediumship is not practiced, and participants sit at a table in meditation (Shanon, 2002).

There is no official stance on homosexuality in the Santo Daime church, although there is a strong cultural bias in Brazil against accepting it. The current leader, Padrinho Alfredo, responded to a Brazilian reporter's question regarding his views on homosexuality, replying, "I can not judge the homosexual who is faithful to the doctrine. We trust his evolution as a divine being" (Gonçalves, 2007). However, in a book on his experiences in the Santo Daime church, one of the principal leaders and spokesperson for Santo Daime ICEFLU, Alex Polari de Alverga, made comments in his book *Forest of Visions* (1999) in which, describing the views of Padrinho Sebastião, he characterizes the residents of Sodom and Gomorrah as suffering from "derangement" because of their practice of homosexuality. He stated that Sebastião saw this same behavior in Rio de Janeiro, but met people there who had overcome this and other "confusion about love" by partaking of Daime. Polari further warned against regarding behavior seen in large urban centers as normal that he calls "perversions" and "sexual obsession," and recommends traditional family life as the bastion against the temptations of modernity. Despite these traditionalist views, the practice of polygamy has arisen among the leadership of ICEFLU. Here we may be seeing a case of ayahuasca-related cultural change. It can be imagined that community ayahuasca rituals provided experiences for both the leaders and within the

community that made it possible to imagine the institution of a new pattern of family relationships.

The other international Brazilian ayahuasca church, União do Vegetal (UDV), was founded in 1961 by rubber tapper Jose Gabriel de Costa, known as Mestre Gabriel. It is organized in a strict hierarchy, headed by an elected leader who serves for two years, and is always a man (with the exception of Mestre Gabriel's widow, appointed by him). There are levels that adherents attain as a result of their remembering and understanding the doctrine and learning the "*chamadas*" or songs that tell the story of the UDV in sessions. Secrecy is a prominent feature of the UDV, and members are not allowed to discuss the secret history as told in these *chamadas* with outsiders or with members who have attained a lesser status in the church. It is Christian-based, with elements of indigenous Brazilian and African elements as well as spiritist ideas as interpreted by Mestre Gabriel (Brissac, 2010). Various committees govern the UDV, and the committee on scientific research determined that the research in this dissertation would not be beneficial to the church, and so refused cooperation. A statement against homosexuality, abortion and the use of stem cells was distributed to be read during rituals. This statement was not officially made available to the public, but has been published anonymously on a public ayahuasca Internet forum (UDV Policy Document, 2008). No members of the UDV responded to recruitment for participation in this study.

Shamanistic Use of Ayahuasca

Prior to the advent of the ayahuasca churches, ayahuasca was used primarily

in a shamanic context. Shamanism is an ancient spiritual practice found across the world in indigenous cultures. A shaman is the conduit to the world of spirits for the community. To access this world, the shaman enters into an altered state of consciousness in which he or she contacts animal spirit allies or other spirits for the purpose of healing, removing curses, or discovering information not otherwise accessible. The shaman traditionally undergoes an initiation in which he or she symbolically dies and is reborn to his or her identity as shaman (Winkelman, 2002). The shaman is said to leave her body and travel to upper or lower worlds to seek answers or allies. Shamans also claim to be able to turn into animals for a period of time. Drugs are not the only way shamans alter their consciousness. Fasting, singing, dancing, drumming or other physical activities can also alter consciousness (Eliade, 1964; Harner, 1980).

Ayahuasca continues to be used by shamans in indigenous communities in South America, and ayahuasca shamans have traveled worldwide to offer ayahuasca healing sessions to individuals (Holman, 2010; Dobkin de Rios, 2008). In these sessions, participants drink the brew with the shaman. Songs known as *icaros* are sung by the shamans to call spirits to assist in their work. The shaman will then perform healing techniques such as sucking or blowing actions on the skin of participants to remove or replace ephemeral spirit-matter, and he may also use tobacco smoke to purify the participants and the area the ceremony is being held (Harner, 1980; Weiskopf, 2005; Beyer, 2010).

People around the world are gaining increasing access to ayahuasca, either as it is brought to them in the cities and countries where they live, or during

ceremonies that they have traveled to South America to participate in. Ayahuasca tourism and traveling shamans have contributed to the growing use of ayahuasca in the context of indigenous ceremonies (Dobkin de Rios & Rumrill, 2008).

Participation in shamanic rituals does not require a belief in god or a theological system. In South America, shamans often utilize ayahuasca, and ayahuasca tourism is becoming a major industry in the Amazon as North Americans and Europeans pay large sums to receive treatments and trainings from renowned shamans (Dobkin de Rios & Rumrill, 2008). Typically in these ceremonies the shaman drinks with the participants. The participants then lie in hammocks or sit on the ground while the shaman sings icaros, which are songs used to call spirits. Shamans are said to be able to fly, to assume the form of animals and to have special powers, such as telepathy (Harner, 1980). One does not need to be a shaman oneself to participate in these ceremonies, but more extensive shaman trainings are available. Previously, these trainings were offered to select members of tribes because of signs they exhibited, but now they can be purchased by contacting various tour operations. Ayahuasca tourism and the money that can be made in otherwise impoverished regions of the jungle have created a situation in which the few remaining traditional shamans are overshadowed by entrepreneurs who have better marketing skills but may have no training or authentic status within their communities (Dobkin de Rios & Rumrill, 2008). Thus, experiences with shamans can be negatively impacted by the financial motives of the shaman supervising the ayahuasca session, and unknowledgeable purveyors of ayahuasca may concoct and administer inferior

brews to naïve seekers, and may be unsure of how to handle unusual reactions. Traditional shamans endured long initiation periods and were not paid money for their services, but were provided with gifts and services in return for their efforts. The ambiguous legal status of ayahuasca worldwide makes regulation of the brew and those who administer it difficult (Luna, 2008).

In addition to the Christian churches and shamanistic circles, there are hundreds of offshoot groups that have integrated ayahuasca use with other beliefs. These include the “post-Islamic” Fatimiya Sufi order and the “Iluminada Ordem do Amor,” two groups with forums on the Internet (ayahuasca.com) as well as others including the “Ile ale efu l’ase” a group that combines African Orixá worship with ayahuasca use that one of the participants in this study practiced with. The beliefs of this group center around gods connected to natural forces, with Catholic saints sometimes representing these beings, as they were used to disguise Orixá worship during times of repression of African beliefs (Walker, 1990).

The freedom of the shamanic ceremony stands in contrast to the rigidity of the ayahuasca churches. Some gay people have embraced “neo-shamanism,” practices utilizing altered states of consciousness for personal spiritual purposes (Wallis, 1999), relating to its outsider nature and challenge to major religions’ claims to truth. Gay people also look to Native American cultures outside of Christian influence, some of which honored homosexuals, who were seen as especially suited to be shamans, and “two-spirit” people who were honored for their spiritual sensitivity and gifts (Warren, 1998). Shamans in Siberia are

considered to be a “third class” of gender and may wed individuals of the same sex, and can dress in the clothing of the opposite gender to fully express their identity (Wallis, 2003).

Neo-shamanism may involve earth worship and animistic beliefs, and in Europe is often related to Druidic beliefs. Neo-shamans do not attempt to copy the behavior of past shamans, but use them as templates for rituals designed by the participants themselves. Neo-shamanic practice can appeal to the queer population because it is free of cultural baggage except what the participants choose to include. It has been criticized for misappropriating and bastardizing true shamanic traditions (Wallis, 2000). Neo-shamanism was first popularized by Carlos Castaneda (1973), who tied together several traditions, including the use of entheogens, in his presentation of the beliefs of Don Juan, the teacher who he claimed initiated him into the shamanic world in his books. Research has revealed that Don Juan was a largely fictional construct of Castaneda (DeMille, 1976). Traditional shamans work on behalf of others as a service, while neo-shamans are more interested in their own personal development, using the techniques of traditional shamanism to learn about themselves or heal emotional wounds (Berger, 2006). Neo-shamanic ayahuasca ceremonies may incorporate many of the traditions of indigenous use, such as sitting in a circle around an altar, invocation of spiritual forces or beings, drumming, chanting, guidance by a leader and meditation. Participants in these rituals are most often looking to heal psychological wounds which are the result of trauma, to develop self-awareness,

and experience closeness to nature and to unseen spirits that ayahuasca is purported to provide (Winkelman, 2007).

Psychedelics and Sexual Minorities

Homosexuality has been considered a problem that needed treatment since the 1920's. Homosexuality was not construed as a medical or psychological illness until homosexuals began to become conspicuous as they moved to cities and began to congregate in groups. Prior to that, homosexuality, while widespread, was largely viewed as descriptive of certain "lewd" acts, rather than as a social identity (D'Emilio, 1983). In 1973, the American Psychiatric Association removed homosexuality from its list of mental illnesses in the DSM, where it had been listed as a disorder since the first publication of the manual in 1952, and in 1975 the American Psychological Association did the same.

One early use of psychedelics by psychologists was in attempts to treat homosexuals in order to change their sexual orientation. "Conversion therapy" is a treatment that attempts to change the sexual orientation of homosexuals. This practice became more controversial after the removal of homosexuality from the DSM in 1973 (Drescher & Zucker, 2006). In 2003, Spitzer published reports of homosexuals changing their sexual orientation through therapy, and the argument about whether sexual orientation is mutable was re-opened in the psychological community. The opinion of the American Psychological Association (APA) is that there are no safe or effective ways of changing someone's sexual orientation, and therapies that claim to do so can reinforce negative views of homosexuality and be harmful to the client (APA, 2008). The ethical foundation for treating

individuals with socially undesirable traits with powerful psychedelic compounds in an effort to rid them (and society) of these traits is highly suspect (Leifer, 2000).

A study by Alpert (1969) was one of the earliest reports in the literature on sexual minority experience with psychedelics. It is one example of conversion therapy found in the literature (also: Masters & Houston, 1966; Martin, 1962; Stafford & Golightly, 1967). Alpert administered 200 micrograms of LSD-25 to a male self-identified bisexual volunteer who was dissatisfied with his attraction to men. During his fifteen-hour trip, the subject was shown pictures of women and encouraged to develop feelings toward them. In subsequent LSD sessions, a woman the subject knew was present and he had sexual intercourse with her. One year after the treatment, Alpert reported that the man was living with a woman, but had had two subsequent homosexual encounters, which the subject described as tests of himself to see if the changes he had experienced as a result of the treatment were “real.” Alpert explained that the use of LSD allowed the subject to take a broader view of the archetype of “woman” and find connections to primal desires within the archetype, which he could then generalize to all women.

Grof (2000) treated homosexual clients with LSD. He came to the conclusion that gay men’s dislike of sex with women was related to images of “vagina dentate” and castration fantasies that were envisioned during LSD sessions. He relates lesbianism to the desire to be close to the mother. Grof admits that he has treated mostly homosexuals who were dissatisfied with their orientation, and that a healthy adjustment to same-sex orientation is possible and

may not represent intra-psychic struggle. Grof also noted that subjects in LSD treatments often saw their sexuality in archetypal or trans-cultural ways, such as witnessing fertility rites, initiation ceremonies, and temple prostitution.

Masters and Houston (1966) reported giving the psychotropic cactus peyote to a self-identified gay male volunteer in *The Varieties of Psychedelic Experience*. Masters and Houston's views reflect an outdated view of homosexuality as pathology. Working from the assumption that homosexuality is an undesirable orientation, Masters and Houston attempted to treat their gay clients with repeated doses of peyote. In this report, they found that the participant displayed more heterosexual behavior and a greater desire to appreciate his appearance after the peyote experience.

Masters and Houston also reported that 12 out of 14 male homosexual volunteers in a psychedelic experiment had distorted body images that the researchers contended to be causal to homosexuality, although they admitted they could not prove this. They found that by taking psychedelics, the body image distortion was corrected and they observed a trend toward "heterosexualization." They also spoke stereotypically of the passivity of the homosexual man being transformed by psychedelic therapy, and attributed a deepening of the voice, greater vigor, improved posture and greater masculinity to treatment with LSD. In the case reviewed by Masters and Houston, the researchers were discouraged by their subject's "considerable investment in his homosexuality" and felt unable to capitalize on the "gains" made in therapy (p. 200). They proceeded to

speculate on the progress they might have made had the subject been more motivated to become heterosexual.

A study by Martin (1962) looked at the effects of LSD on twelve gay men. Martin recommended LSD as a treatment for homosexuality. Administering many low doses in a treatment known as psycholytic (mind-separating) therapy and encouraging intense mother-transference, Martin claimed that seven out of twelve achieved heterosexual orientation with only one “slight relapse” in a three to six year follow-up (Sandison, 2001).

Stafford and Golightly (1967) reported on LSD therapy for homosexuals during the 1960’s. They found that homosexual issues were often resolved using psychedelic therapy, and that homosexuals would either be at peace with their orientation after LSD therapy or decide that they were really heterosexual. Stafford and Golightly viewed homosexuality as a result of early childhood trauma and “morbid dependency” on parents, both of which could be treated with regressive “shock therapy” with LSD. Stafford and Golightly (1967) recommended that LSD be used to treat transvestism, fetishism, and sadomasochism in the same way that it could be used to treat homosexuality. This view reflects the thinking current in the late 60’s, in which homosexuality was viewed as a mental disease, related to paraphilias (Suppe, 1984).

Native healers in Brazil and Peru share certain beliefs about gender and the use of ayahuasca, some of which have been incorporated into the practices of the ayahuasca churches. These include beliefs about menstruating women being harmful to the production of the tea. Indigenous practices of some tribes of

barring women from partaking of the drink and from being healers or leaders have not been incorporated in the churches, however (Dobkin de Rios & Rumrill, 2008). The churches represent a modernization of the use of ayahuasca, and the inclusion of women in ceremonies reflects this. As ayahuasca spreads internationally, beliefs associated with it that are particular to the Amazon and the Catholic, Latino culture that pervades that area will be examined critically by new users.

One question that still needs to be answered in the literature is: How do the beliefs that define the structure of these practices interact with the direct experience of gay and lesbian people who participate in these rituals? The answer to this question may reveal how this marginalized population integrates religious experience with self-acceptance. It appears in the above cases of entheogenic therapy with homosexuals that the subjects' experience was measured against a heterosexual agenda. It is because such bias exists that an objective study of gay people and their use of entheogens, looking at their experience as they report it, needs to be done.

Personal Narratives

Ayahuasca experiences can be dramatic and meaningful, and there is a growing body of reports by users on its effects (Metzner, 1999; Weiskopf, 2005; Shanon, 2008). Heterosexuals make most of these reports, and they can be used as a basis of comparison to determine if notable differences arise in their descriptions compared to that of gay and lesbian respondents.

Rare personal reports of individual experiences can be found in the literature on entheogens and sexual minorities. First-person stories about entheogenic experiences by gays and other sexual minorities help expand the story of what is happening as the use of ayahuasca spreads. One early instance of a public report of entheogenic experience by a gay man was the testimony of the poet Allan Ginsburg, who wrote some of the first literature on his ayahuasca use mentioned previously in this review (Burroughs & Ginsburg, 1963). He advocated the use of LSD for personal and social transformation when addressing a Congressional subcommittee on the use of LSD and marijuana on college campuses in 1966. In his testimony, he described feeling closer to women as the result of his experiences with peyote (Ginsberg, 1966).

A more recent report made by a post-op transgender woman (Denny, 2006) described her most recent experience using LSD. She and a “pre-op” transgender woman agreed to take LSD and at the peak of their experiences, they agreed they would look at themselves naked, side by side in a full length mirror, “We would look to see if whether we were monsters or whether we were God’s beautiful creatures. And through the wide open doors of perception, we saw the truth: We were beautiful” (Denny, 2006, p.63).

Berkowitz (2008), a lesbian, wrote about encountering her grandmothers in a vision during an ayahuasca experience on her 30th birthday. She concluded her report by saying that she felt she had “reclaimed (her) life”.

Merkur (2007) described a man who took LSD and was able to integrate and accept the fact that he had had homosexual experiences in the past;

experiences he had previously been unable to reconcile with his self-image. He came to the conclusion that it was not a “big deal” and during this experience, he was able to perceive himself in a non-judgmental way that proved healing for him.

Annie Sprinkle (2003) a bisexual sex worker, educator and performer, wrote about her experiences with drugs and entheogens. She had not tried ayahuasca, but had taken “pharmahuasca,” a combination of chemical and natural sources of DMT and MAOI. She related that she felt that experience was preparing her for her death. Her experiences lead her to the conclusion that entheogens can have a role in sex therapy because they can help individuals gain a fresh perspective on their identity. She posits that sexuality and the use of entheogens are both about consciousness and self-discovery.

A gay author, Young (2003) described a trip to Peru with two other HIV+ men to drink ayahuasca with a renowned shaman. He recounted how each man with HIV came to the same conclusion in their visions; that the virus needed them to live off of, and that using this information they could negotiate a relationship where both the virus and its carrier would be able to survive.

Homosexuality and Religion

To understand the religious implications of ayahuasca for gay people, it is important to try to understand the differences in heterosexuals’ and gays’ and lesbians’ experience of religion. What are the barriers to lesbian and gay people’s participation in religious or spiritual activities, and how does this affect their spiritual experiences? It may be useful to look at how gays and lesbians navigate

conflicts between sexual orientation and religious practice and the impact this can have on their mental health.

Sexuality of all kinds was regarded by the Christian church's official doctrine as a distraction from spirituality, and celibacy was the ideal. Sexual activity was to be reserved for procreation. Homosexuality epitomized sexual activity that has no procreative purpose, and the condemnation of homosexual people in the Catholic church has continued based on literal interpretations of the Bible and reliance on doctrinal guidance by church leaders (Versluis, 2008). Other Christian churches offer more or less acceptance, some identifying as "welcoming churches," meaning they accept gay members, but these are often in conflict with orthodox branches of the same denominations that define homosexuality as a sin (Johnson, 2008).

Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim and Jewish traditions all forbid homosexuality, although there are organized groups of gays and lesbians who are members of all these denominations. The political force known as the "Christian Right," a religious conservative voting bloc, has been responsible for legislation expressly designed to limit the participation of gays and lesbians in public life by preventing marriages, keeping gays and lesbians from being teachers and preventing gays and lesbians from adopting children. Gays and lesbians are barred from full participation in secular life based on conservative religious doctrine (Dreyfuss, 1999).

Religion has been an organizing social force for humanity since recorded time. Until recently, religious mandate was the way a person determined his or

her role in society. Times are changing, though, and acceptance for gay and lesbian people has been growing (Stotzer, 2008).

One indicator of the acceptance of gay and lesbian people by the larger society is a belief in the biological nature of homosexuality. In a poll done by major news outlets in 1977, 13% of the respondents said they thought people were born gay (Perry, 2007). This belief has increased during the last 20 years. In a 2007 poll, 39% said they believe people are born gay. Younger people were found to have more accepting views than older people. However, churches are often bastions of tradition, and the situation that gay and lesbian people encounter when they seek group experience of religious practice is often one of rejection and condemnation (Comstock, 1996). In the early 1970's, many religious groups issued statements in which they supported civil rights for gay people, at the same time saying that their beliefs were not compatible with homosexuality. Since then, the debate has been opened within practicing religious bodies on the acceptability of homosexuality.

Reconciling religious teachings that condemn homosexuality with participation in worship by gay and lesbian people has been a challenge as gays and lesbians have started to be more open about their lives. This conflict has recently resulted in schisms and charges of heresy in the Anglican Church (Flook, 2008). The Catholic Church has long faced dissent resulting from its rejection of gay people. Gays and lesbians have created a separate church, the Metropolitan Community Church, which honors their sexual orientations. However, many gay and lesbian people want to attend the churches or other houses of worship in

which they were raised, and have pushed for inclusion in ceremonies held in mainstream churches and synagogues, including weddings.

Some gay Christians see their spirituality to be particularly related to their sexual orientation. For example, Malcolm Boyd (1991) proposed three main tasks for gays in Christian churches today: helping gay and lesbian people come out of the closet, helping to eliminate homophobia in the heterosexual community, and helping gay Christians understand the role of sexuality in the spiritual life.

It may be that gays and lesbians have a distinct approach to spirituality or religion that may be perceived or expressed differently than heterosexual people. Johnson predicted in his book *Gay Spirituality* (2004) that Christian religions will be replaced by an ethnically neutral and sex-bias free form of Buddhism combined with the social teaching of Jesus, minus the miracles and non-human identity of Christ. He called on gay people to advance this ideal. Johnson described attributes of gay spirituality in contrast to heterosexual spirituality, including such qualities as experiencing spirituality from an outsider's perspective, and being non-judgmental about sex, with a belief in the unity of all existence, and a process of evolution of spiritual awareness, which results in transformation of mythology, psychology and culture (Johnson, 2004). Attempts to synthesize religions may lose the underlying foundation of the original belief, or may add to the experience of the practitioner and make such amalgams powerful and relevant for the people for whom previous forms have lost relevance (Stewart & Shaw, 1994).

Johnson's (2004) view that gays and lesbians will join in the creation of a new religion seems to run counter to the continued attendance by gay people at the mainstream churches that they consider their rightful spiritual path, despite often being despised. Boyd (1991) remarked on gays' and lesbians' understanding of being outcaste as giving them special insight into and appreciation for Jesus' teachings; "We are a broken people who understand the brokenness of others" (p. 11). Christianity has a history of empathy for the underclass, although Jesus' call for compassion and acceptance for all has usually been outweighed by cultural sanctions against deviance.

In a study examining the importance of spirituality in gay and lesbian lives, it was concluded that they lead rich spiritual lives regardless of involvement in the organized religions. The author of this study, Tan (2005), said, "The fact that gay men and lesbians have been discriminated against by society, particularly by traditional religions, may have challenged them to look beyond the tenets of organized religions and to seek more intensely for answers to the meaning of existence and faith" (p. 141).

The benefits of participation in religious communities have been supported in a number of studies of different groups (Ellison, Boardman, Williams, & Jackson, 2001; George, Larson, Koenig, & McCullough, 2000; Koenig & Larson, 2001). These benefits include lowered rates of many physical diseases, lowered rate of overall mortality, lowered incidences of drug and alcohol addiction and greater marital satisfaction (Seybold & Hill, 2001). With the understanding that sexuality is a primary component of identity, having a

personal acceptance of that for oneself is key to general self-esteem (Chamberlein & Haaga, 2001). In a study by Lease, Horne, and Noffshinger-Frazier (2005), greater psychological health in gay and lesbian people was positively correlated with being accepted by an affirming faith group. In addition, they found that greater psychological health was also found in gays and lesbians who did not experience affirmation from their faith group but who experienced independent development of their own personal spirituality. This finding is relevant to gays and lesbians who attend ayahuasca churches because they may experience feelings of alienation as the result of Christian dogma, but this research indicated they may also have independent spiritual experiences within this context that can be meaningful and important to them. In addition, as was reported by several participants, gay people may interpret the Bible in a pro-gay way and reconcile the desire for community with like-minded worshippers (Thumma, 1991).

The purpose of this literature review is to examine the research on ayahuasca and on the spiritual and religious practices of gay and lesbian people, to find where they intersect, and to take note of the gaps in knowledge that become apparent. From this knowledge base, trends in ayahuasca use among gay and lesbian people can be contextualized and research questions about the impact and meaning of ayahuasca practices in gay and lesbian lives can be formulated. The question of how ayahuasca use, with its origins in traditional and indigenous practices, has and will be transformed by intersection with Western culture in America and Europe is still being answered. Lesbian and gay people have distinct viewpoints as a result of their unique status in society that may help expand the

way we understand perception of self and how it intersects with culture in adaptive ways. Renewed interest in psychedelic research should not overlook the viewpoints of sexual minorities or assume they are the same as those of the heterosexual majority.

Method

The purpose of this study is to understand the experiences of gay and lesbian people who have used ayahuasca, and the effects the environment and cultural setting have on the experiences, especially in regard to their own perception of their identity. Content analysis was used to analyze the data compiled from interviews with seventeen participants who have used ayahuasca in the past three years with at least one other person.

Content Analysis

Content analysis of narrative is a method of qualitative analysis in which instances of meaning are extracted from textual data such as interviews and categorized to create a meaningful picture of the object under investigation. Hsieh and Shannon (2007) define content analysis as “a research method for the subjective interpretation of the content of text data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns” (p. 1278). Krippendorff (2003) defines it as: “a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from text (or other meaningful matter) to the contexts of their use” (p. 18). The use of qualitative content analysis in this study will allow for careful attention to the voices and meanings of the participants. Analysis of narrative accounts of individuals’ experience offers advantages that other methodologies lack, including allowing in-depth exploration of subjective states, or the ways of thinking and feeling which characterize other cultures (Reis &

Judd, 2000). Content analysis allows for the analysis of meanings and connections that may go unnoticed in a casual or non-scientific reading of the interviews.

The interview was semi-structured in format. Follow-up questions could be asked at the time of the interview, and contact information was gathered in case additional information was needed from participants.

Assumptions, Limitations and Considerations

Assumptions that may have influenced this research included the idea that gay, lesbian or bisexual people would have experiences that reflect the environments they drink the ayahuasca in and their past experiences with religion and spirituality. There may be feelings of alienation from heterocentric church dogma or culture, and re-interpretations of heterosexist religious or spiritual views. It was assumed that there would be a variety of responses and that some participants would opt out of church environments in favor of shamanic circles or non-directed or solo use, while others would provide insight into how gays, bisexuals and lesbians adjust to doctrine or communities that do not honor their orientation.

Kenneth Pike coined the terms “emic” and “etic” in 1954 to describe two ways language could be used in anthropological studies: either using the language of the subjects of the study or using anthropological language (Patton, 2002). This dichotomy is a controversial one in the social sciences, but it is safe to say that both emic and etic approaches have advantages and disadvantages. A synthesis of both emic and etic approaches may be the only approach that can be

used in a truly multicultural context: Understanding individual cultures from the emic viewpoint of the members of that culture enables researchers to make more accurate cross-cultural conclusions from an etic standpoint (DeLamater, 2003). This researcher is a lesbian member of the Santo Daime church since 1998, and has an insider's knowledge of the experience of a lesbian ayahuasca user. She also had experiences drinking ayahuasca with shamans in Ecuador, Peru and Europe and in informal groups in the United States. There exists the possibility that her experiences may predispose her to certain preconceptions. As a native of the United States, this researcher is also an outsider to these traditions that originate in South America. Experiences are filtered through the lens of cultural background. These experiences and predispositions may have caused some avenues of questioning in the interview to be neglected.

Efforts were made to recruit participants from diverse ayahuasca practices, as well as to balance the genders of respondents. Despite this, no participants from the União de Vegetal responded to recruitment efforts. Because of strong hierarchical institutional controls, and a rejection of this study by the central offices of the UDV, it may have been seen as disloyal for members to participate. The participants were contacted via e-mail to set a time for the interviews.

The Process of Analysis

This researcher analyzed the interviews and coded them according to thematic categories that were generated in the first interviews. Interview questions were altered to reflect the responses, and to provide more complete data on the research question. The themes that emerged were applied across the

interviews. The questions were directed at exploring ten areas of enquiry: (a) the effect of ayahuasca on identity in general, (b) the effect of ayahuasca on identity regarding sexual orientation, (c) the effect of ayahuasca on sexuality in general, (d) comfort of the participants with group members with whom they consumed ayahuasca, (e) comfort with the beliefs about sexual orientation of the group the participants consumed ayahuasca with, (f) the effect of ayahuasca on spirituality, (g) the effect of ayahuasca on “life,” (h) aspects of the participants’ ayahuasca use they felt uncomfortable about, (i) perception of externally appreciable change, and (j) changes in future use. Within these areas, themes emerged which are discussed in the results and conclusion. By developing themes using content analyses that are grounded in empirical data and using them to compare cases, it is possible to make conclusions while remaining open to the variations in each individual’s narrative (Flick, 2002). Content analysis has been used for cross-cultural studies, which allow for the voices and concerns of the participants to define the themes (Estrada, 2008; Mundy, 2006; Huskins, 2003) as well as in studies of altered states of consciousness, which require analysis of subjective states that can be evaluated best using qualitative content analysis (Saft, 2007; Hirakata, 2007).

Because this is a non-probability study, bias exists in that participants were contacted through a network using snowball sampling. The selection of gay and lesbian participants who use ayahuasca in a variety of different environments is one way to mitigate bias in this study.

Participants

This study utilized a snowball sample of 17 people over the age of 18 at the time of the interview who identified as gay or lesbian (including one self-identified bisexual who was in a long-term lesbian relationship), and who have had an experience using ayahuasca with at least one other person in the past three years. Solo use has been excluded from this study because the choice to drink ayahuasca with another person adds the dimension of “community” in some form. The support of others and the atmosphere created by and for ayahuasca drinkers is part of any group experience, and the choices and effects of companions and their beliefs on the participants are important considerations in this study. Three years was selected as the cut-off because memories can fade and the culture of ayahuasca users is changing as it grows; recent experiences are more likely to reflect current trends. No vulnerable adults were included in the study. Due to personal language limitations, only English speakers were interviewed. Because of technical problems, the first part of one participant’s interview could not be heard well enough to be transcribed. The answers for this participant that were recorded were included in the research, and she was contacted after the interview to clarify her answers and fill in missing data.

There was a notable imbalance in the number of men versus women who responded to recruitment (12 men versus 5 women). There is no real way of knowing if that imbalance reflects actual numbers of gay men in relation to gay women who are participating in these rituals, but it can be noted that some women

were disqualified because they identified as “bisexual” or did not want to identify as a lesbian even though they had primarily lesbian relationships. One woman who delivered her demographics form after the interview was included even though she identified as “bisexual” because she was in a long-term lesbian relationship (and the interview had already been conducted). It was decided to exclude bisexuals to keep the data more clearly defined and because the gay identity is more likely to be problematic in religious and conservative contexts. Diamond (2000) argues for inclusion of women who do not identify as lesbian or bisexual in studies on sexual-minority life-course due to the fluidity that has been seen in sexual orientation identity among women throughout their lives, a characteristic not found widely in men. This issue of identity could be considered further complicated in this study by the inclusion of another woman who identified as “queer” and “lesbian” but who was dating a woman who was transitioning to become a man, thus changing her technical identification from “lesbian” to “heterosexual” due to the gender of her primary partner. Here, her self-identification as “queer” might most accurately define this woman’s sexual orientation. The tactic of including more women who did not firmly identify as lesbians might have resulted in a greater number of female participants in this study, but it was not followed. Fluid sexuality without defining labels allows for feelings of inclusion in heterosexual norms even if at the same time leading to feelings of alienation, while identification as “lesbian” or the more inclusive “queer” place one more clearly on the outside and as a target for anti-gay doctrine

in religion and social commentary. For these reasons, it was decided to recruit self-identified lesbians and to exclude bisexuals of either gender.

Recruitment

Participants were recruited through snowball sampling, using key informants in the Santo Daime and shamanic circle communities in the United States, through the Internet newsletter of ayahuasca researcher Beatriz Labate, and through Internet message boards on “ayahuasca.com” and “tribe.net.” These message boards provide a virtual meeting place for ayahuasca users from various traditions to discuss their experiences anonymously.

Data Collection and Analysis

A demographic questionnaire was administered prior to the interview. This collected data on age, location, religious background, previous use of drugs, and other data that helped contextualize responses. See Appendix B. Participants were provided with an informed consent form (see Appendix A) and educated about the content of the study. They were told that they have the right to withdraw from the study at any point. Each participant was asked to agree to have her or his interview recorded and transcribed. They were informed that their data will be kept under lock and key and that only the dissertation chair and myself will have access to it. Participants were assigned code numbers instead of names to help ensure anonymity. Participants were offered access to the results of the study when it is completed. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with each participant, using open-ended questions, allowing for follow-up questions as needed for elaboration and clarification. See Appendix D for interview questions.

The interview questions were altered from the original draft after the first two interviews to engender better response to the research questions. Interviews were designed to last from 45 minutes to one hour, and in fact lasted from 25 minutes to 70 minutes. The majority fell in the original parameters.

Once identifying data were removed, the researcher had each interview transcribed verbatim. Using conventional qualitative content analysis, the data was coded for instances of similar meaning. As the data was analyzed, the themes emerged which were then organized in a coding scheme and transferred to cards for sorting. These broad categories were refined as participants' responses began to define themes. Questions were related to the focus of the study, including mentions of times that sexual orientation was salient during an ayahuasca experience, positive and negative perceptions of attitudes towards gay and lesbian people in the setting the ayahuasca is consumed in, indications of pro- or anti-gay or lesbian sentiments in group philosophy, feelings of inclusion or separation, theological constructs relating to homosexuality, the effect of participation in ayahuasca rituals on relationships, sexuality and life in general, beliefs about future changes in acceptance of minority sexual orientation, and other instances of meaning that were developed as the data were accrued.

Timeline to Completion

The proposal was completed in August 2009. Collection of data began in September 2009. Data collection was completed in November 2010. Data analysis proceeded in the winter of 2010 and the dissertation was defended in the spring of 2011.

Results

This data was collected and organized according to the research questions below, labeled A-J. These areas of focus were developed to help clarify the impact of various factors on the experiences of participants. They cover areas in which participants made comments relevant to the impact of ayahuasca sessions on their lives. Themes that emerged are herein discussed.

Responses A: Effect on Identity in General

One theme that emerged was of a re-definition of the self. Respondents remarked on new understandings of themselves as “part of everything” or “part of God.” Some saw themselves as divine beings with celestial parents, descended from the stars or having a mission on Earth to complete. As one woman said, “I had a vision of flying to Earth from the Milky Way on my path of service here on Earth, and it was all connected the plant medicine.... I understood myself as a person from the stars.” The theme of self-acceptance was common, combined sometimes with the discovery by some of the capacity to heal others, and for some a connection to other people that they had not felt before.

Some participants made reference to the ego and duality and how ayahuasca helped them to understand the dynamics of perception of the self. One participant remarked on a session in which he had an “incredibly non-dual experience where I just knew we were all one.” Another participant said that she experienced a profound shift in her identity in regard to understanding the sexual abuse she had experienced as a child, moving from being an extrovert to

withdrawing and finally striking a balance, being more free to comment on negative situations that before she had been unwilling to confront. She felt an integration of her positive and negative sides as result of her participation in ayahuasca ceremonies. Other participants noted a unifying effect, reaching back to their childhood identity or putting pieces of their lives back together.

Ayahuasca was perceived by some as clearing away obstacles to true perceptions about the self or that it actively disclosed the true aspects of themselves to themselves. One man said, “I was able to see through my mask, my persona, my identity, and know that it was a mask, a persona, an adopted identity and that underneath it is the world; God is looking out with this mask on.”

The environment in which ayahuasca was taken (church vs. shamanic ceremony) did not seem to create substantial differences in these themes.

Responses B: Effect on Identity Regarding Sexual Orientation

No participants reported negative effects on their perception of their sexual orientation as a result of taking ayahuasca. For some participants, sexual orientation was not an issue in their ayahuasca experiences. One participant said it did not have any effect on his perception of his sexual orientation, but only of his sexual behaviors. Another participant said he was comfortable being queer and that the issue of his sexual orientation never came up, although he felt ayahuasca put him more in touch with his sexuality. One gay respondent said that he felt that sexual orientation was not as important to him now, because these “labels fall away” as a result of ayahuasca experiences.

Ayahuasca experiences had an impact on perception of gender identity that was noted by some of the participants. One lesbian said that she felt her experiences balanced her gender identification and allowed her to experience herself as a “two-spirited” person, in line with her Native American heritage, which recognizes and honors gay people as being “two-spirited” and gives them a special place of honor in their culture. Another male participant made reference to ayahuasca helping him to recognize a balance in genders in himself. One gay man said he felt ayahuasca helped him to be more comfortable with gender, and with his lack of identification with either gender fully. Another lesbian said she felt ayahuasca helped her experience fluidity in her sexual identity, and experience herself as a soul who is genderless or who is both genders.

Several participants commented on feeling self-acceptance, and affirmation that their sexual orientation was “OK,” or that as they became more comfortable with themselves in general, they also became more comfortable with their sexual orientation. “My sexual orientation has gotten clearer and clearer. I used to think I could swing both ways, but now I don’t have any interest in the opposite sex at all, and I am very accepting of that.”

One male participant in Santo Daime rituals described an experience of the Archangel Michael using a sword to cut away his own homophobic perceptions. Another gay man said he felt his sexual orientation was reinforced, and told of a vision of having sex with Mestre Irineu, the founder of the Santo Daime church, in which his sexual orientation was affirmed. Two participants described the effect of ayahuasca of removing layers of obstacles to clear

perception and acceptance of sexual orientation. One of these men, a member of Santo Daime, reported conversations with God in which he asked if it was really OK to be gay, and the positive response he received with a warning that while being gay was acceptable, some of the behaviors of gay men, including impersonal sex, were not. He then described gay angels who took him to heaven to be healed from the wounds he had that were caused by homophobia. Two gay men credited ayahuasca experiences with giving them inspiration to come out about their sexual orientation to others they feared disapproved. As one said, “(after drinking ayahuasca) I started sharing with some close friends about my sexual orientation. And that was the power, that I could have this experience that I could go deep into the plant, and she could open my heart and my fears and allow me to come to a sort of resolution; a look at myself in a such a way that I then went out into the world and made real hard changes in my life.”

Responses C: Effect on Sexuality in General

For some participants, ayahuasca had the effect of lessening sexual desire. One woman reported that she had lost the desire for sex, and was reserving her energy for ayahuasca. Another participant found that he was able to get control of his sexual impulses and pornography addiction by participating in *dietas*, a shamanic ayahuasca tradition in which alcohol, drugs, sex, sugar, salt, red meat and some other substances are forbidden in order to enhance the ayahuasca experience. One man said that he did not think he could work on bodily desires, sexual “chi” or sexual energy in the context of ayahuasca, but that he came to understand his sexual power and possibly experienced sexual healing through the

use of ayahuasca. He also said that ayahuasca had increased his safer-sex practices, as it had increased his healthful practices in many ways. One gay man said that as a result of ayahuasca experiences, he sees sexual focus as “something of a joke,” and that his identity as a sexual person had ended. One participant said sexuality had never come up in ayahuasca sessions.

Other participants found a deeper experience of sexuality, sexual awakening, and opening. A lesbian participant who had been sexually abused experienced healing of her sexuality through ayahuasca sessions in Santo Daime. She said, “Sexuality and spirituality are so unified in a way that they never used to be before; so much deeper and both cosmic and full body and mind-blowingly sublime.”

A gay man said he felt healed of his sexual addiction and now had sex in relationship to love, rather than for the sake of sex itself. Another gay man said his sexuality was “less genital, more heart.” One gay man felt able to experience his sexuality in a way he wasn’t able to before because of guilt. He said, “I felt more free to experience sexual fun in a way that I had missed without as much interpersonal weirdness about things, feeling guilty about things, without feeling suddenly a million miles away, without feeling that everything was such a big deal. You need to be just enjoying life and living it in a way that really makes you happy.” Another found that the self-acceptance found in ayahuasca sessions increased his sexual confidence, which was reflected in his sexual acts and habits. Two participants, a woman and a man, felt frustrated by lack of partners, but this

was a result of geographic isolation from other gay and lesbian people, not a result of ayahuasca experiences.

Responses D: Comfort with Group Members

Most participants did not have a large circle of other ayahuasca-using gay or lesbian people with whom to associate. In general, they felt supported by the groups they drank ayahuasca with, some with the exception of members of their tradition who came from South America, who they felt were homophobic, though this was not always the case. One man said he “played straight” with the Peruvian shaman who ran ceremonies he attended. Some members of Santo Daime said that on trips to Brazil, and to Mapiá, the Amazonian home of the church, they did not reveal their sexual orientation. One woman said that, “Mapiá is a horrible place to be gay.” She also felt pressure from an American church leader to be more feminine than was comfortable for her. All other Santo Daime participants said they felt supported by the local American churches they attended. Two gay men were married in a Santo Daime in Oregon, at the suggestion of the church leader, and one of these men felt supported enough to reveal his sexual orientation to the visiting Brazilian *comitiva*, or group of traveling musicians and church leaders who tour the United States, Europe and other places on worldwide tours. Another gay man was offered a wedding ceremony in his church in California by the leader there, but did not follow through. Some members of Santo Daime who participated in this research commented on the homophobia in the church in Brazil, and contrasted it with the acceptance they felt in the American and European churches.

There were fears from some of the men in Santo Daime that Brazilian men would judge them or mistake friendliness for sexual overtures. This feeling was also present for one man in the United States who felt that some members of his church there did not want to get “too close” because he is gay.

Participants in shamanic traditions had less to say about overt homophobia, and none reported feeling rejected by their local group or groups abroad, though one reported a fellow participant from Europe made homophobic comments (which were not directed at him) when he did ceremonies in Panama. Some commented on the feeling of closeness with their community of ayahuasca-drinkers because they were sharing such intense healing experiences. One said, “I feel comforted and supported for who I am, and overwhelming love and support of other people around me.”

Some participants did not associate with gay members outside their groups because they had other interests, while some said that they brought their partners or had been brought into the group by gay people with whom they still associated. Some found that they were associating more with ayahuasca users and less with friends from outside these groups.

Responses E: Comfort with Beliefs about Homosexuality

The themes that arose in this area showed one of the largest differences between the Santo Daime practitioners and those who drank in shamanic circles. Participants who drank ayahuasca in shamanic circles often were not aware of the beliefs of the shaman regarding homosexuality. One participant said he did not know and was not concerned with the beliefs of the shaman or group that he

practiced with. One man expressed disbelief that any person who drank ayahuasca could have anti-gay feelings, and he said that he thought ayahuasca would cure people of “this negativity.” He said he would have problems continuing his practice if he felt the shaman was not supportive of him as a gay man. One man who drank with a South American shaman said that he felt the shaman was respectful towards his sexual orientation, asked questions to better understand him, and used inclusive language during ceremony. One participant drank in a circle with an American-born shaman. He felt that “spirituality that can’t deal with sexuality” was invalid, and that the beliefs of others in his circle were not an issue. Another male participant in shamanic circles acknowledged the homophobia in Peru, but described his own experience within his shamanic ayahuasca practice in considering the meaning of Christianity and making peace with the persecution he felt as a gay man within Christian tradition. He was the only respondent who felt it had been a challenge to find peace with the shamanic model as a gay man, and that this model was “not necessarily supportive” of alternative sexual expression. This man had also remarked that he “played straight” with the shaman, disguising his sexual orientation. A lesbian participant in shamanic practice was told by a female ayahuasquero that ayahuasca caused people to switch genders. She was also told by a male ayahuasquero that only men were strong enough to drink ayahuasca, but noted in one of the tribes with the strongest tradition of drinking ayahuasca, the Shipibo, that it was primarily women who were the ayahuasqueros. In the end, she said the beliefs of others did not influence her much.

Participants who drank ayahuasca in Santo Daime were critical of the Christian tradition of rejecting or criticizing gay people. Many looked for personal meaning in Christianity beyond dogma and dismissed ideas that did not match their personal beliefs. Some attributed the homophobia of the Santo Daime church to its Brazilian origins, and said that in the United States and Europe, they felt accepted and affirmed. One practitioner of Santo Daime said that he did not consider himself to be a Christian because his personal beliefs included Native American beliefs, shamanistic beliefs, Eastern philosophies, and beliefs that were affirming of his gay nature. One man said that, in regard to homosexuality, he didn't think the church wanted people to go against their nature. He felt the church leaders ignored homosexuality, and noted that it was not celebrated in the church. One man, who married his male partner in an American Santo Daime church and feels supported there, said that he ignores the parts of Christianity which he viewed as perversions of Christ's message, and attributed these ideas to political "power tripping." One man said he regarded Christianity as a metaphor, and though he was a member of Santo Daime, he did not consider himself to be a Christian. He said he ignored what he considered to be the outdated ideas of Christianity in regard to sexuality and homosexuality. One gay member of Santo Daime concluded that Jesus would have been supportive of gay people. A few respondents said they wished that the church were more openly supportive of gay people.

Responses F: Effect on Spirituality

Participants were adamant in their response to questions about the influence of ayahuasca on their spirituality. Both shamanic practitioners and members of Santo Daime had powerful spiritual experiences, with and without Christian elements. Members of Santo Daime did not necessarily report Christian ideas when responding to this query, and some shamanic practitioners spoke of God, Jesus and other religious traditions when describing their spiritual experiences on ayahuasca. When asked how ayahuasca had influenced their spirituality, many respondents said that ayahuasca had had a “profound” influence on their spiritual lives. Two respondents said that they had stopped being atheists as a result of ayahuasca use. One said he realized his identity with God, and related this experience to *zikr* of the Sufis and the experience of non-duality described in Hindu Advaita. Another said he realized his identity as a child of God. One man said he found commonalities to all faiths through ayahuasca. One lesbian said it allowed her to open to a deeper order of things, and base her beliefs on experience rather than simply faith, providing her with a “grounded being of faith,” clarifying her relationship with “the Mother” and with God through her ayahuasca practice. She said, “If it weren’t for the medicine I would not have been able to hold and receive and anchor the depth and breadth of spiritual awakening and wisdom that I feel has now made a home in me.”

A Santo Daime practitioner said it “blew everything else out of the water in terms of religious experience.” One Native American lesbian said her shamanic use of ayahuasca in Peru had helped her tap into her own cultural

spiritual wisdom. One man commented on discovering the bodily, innate nature of his spirituality, unmediated by reason. Another man also felt his relationship to his body was central to his spiritual growth, and that this was shown to him by his use of ayahuasca. He felt that the same spirit that visited Moses visited him, and that he now understands the experience of conversion and what religious people and people of faith experience. One Santo Daime member said he went from being pagan to being Christian and a spirit medium as a result of his ayahuasca practice in the church.

One participant said, “Opening to spirit and to higher realms of consciousness has left me at times in awe and wonderment and in a state of profoundly peaceful grace and connection to the web of life. And so yes, the ayahuasca has been profoundly moving on a spiritual level.” All participants reported strong spiritual experiences as a result of ayahuasca use.

Responses G: Effect of Ayahuasca Ritual on “Life”

Participants found the effect of their participation in these rituals reverberated throughout their lives. As one participant said, “If the experiences stayed only in ceremony and it didn’t affect the rest of my life, I don’t think I would be continuing with the medicine as I have for the last five years.”

Many of the responses focused on health, both mental and physical. Participants talked about stopping “western meds” and anti-depressants, changing their diets, sometimes as a result of *dietas*, giving up addictive behaviors including those related to drugs, sex and pornography and overeating, and referred to an ability to make choices more consciously. Some found it helped

with depression. One woman described her decision to use ayahuasca; “I know I want to take ayahuasca when I look outside and it’s sunny and I think it’s cloudy. I hate this, my serotonin starts to fade.” One participant said she was able to respond with “less forceful reactivity” as a result of her ayahuasca use, and had an easier time with negative emotions.

Psychological enhancement was reported as a result of participation in ayahuasca rituals. Participants reported such phenomena as “letting go of negativity,” being less cynical, feeling more genuine, feeling more accepting of themselves, increasing confidence and calmness. More traditionally religious values were also enhanced in some, including feelings of compassion, generosity, humility, recognizing the importance of love, a responsibility to others, an emphasis on simplicity, not harboring bad thoughts about others, and gratitude. A few respondents said ayahuasca experiences helped them make sense of their lives. One man said, “If the world is a puzzle, ayahuasca helped me put it together, make meaning out of otherwise meaningless events, find a sense of purpose.” Some noted a new connection to nature and plants.

Another theme was a deepening of relationships and realizing the importance of interpersonal connections. Some realized their capacities to be healers and helpers of others, and found they could occupy a valued role within their ayahuasca-drinking communities. Some said they felt less alone. One man said, “It moved me deeper into the heart, deeper into surrender of the ego, and a desire to connect with other people.”

A few participants talked about letting go of relationships that were a drain and did not serve them well, and enhancing relationships with like-minded people. One man commented on his new ability to talk meaningfully with his father. One lesbian talked about ayahuasca giving her the impetus to confront the stepfather who sexually abused her. One man credited his ayahuasca experiences with helping him to come out about his sexual orientation and described a “richer, more joyous life” as a result of ayahuasca use.

Responses H: Aspects Causing Discomfort

Several participants focused on issues of money and sexual impropriety in their responses to this query. When talking about aspects that made him uncomfortable, one Santo Daime member said, “A bigger issue is money. It’s a commodity versus it’s a sacred medicine. There’s too much profit. Money is screwing things up.” A Native American lesbian, responding to the question about anything that may cause discomfort in relation to the shamanic rituals she attended said, “Participating in the commercialization of shamanism. I mean, several places I went ... it was very obvious that it was for money. In fact, everywhere I went except for one person... that was the foremost reason why they were holding these sessions. So that didn’t feel right because as an indigenous woman I’ve been kind of sad to watch our practices be used for reasons other than what they were originally put in place for. So it seemed like... too much money in between the shaman and the patient.”

Two of the participants in shamanic rituals commented on being aware of shamans taking advantage of women who attended their rituals, one remarking

that he thought it was a rare event. Among the Santo Daime practitioners, two of the lesbian respondents commented about the irresponsibility of the church in handling one leader in particular who had repeatedly seduced women in the church and had had complaints lodged against him, but who had not been reproved or banned from continuing to lead services both in Brazil and in the USA. One described this as “the abuse of power by those who put themselves out there as healers.” These women and some other Santo Daime participants noted a dislike of the patriarchal, hierarchical nature of the Santo Daime church, and questioned the way money is handled by the church leadership. The other woman said she would feel uncomfortable about inviting feminist friends because of the patriarchal nature of the church. She also said that as a result of being sexually abused by her stepfather, she found it “unpalatable” to be with people in unquestioned positions of power.

Some participants said they were uncomfortable with the way homosexuality is perceived in Peru and Brazil. One lesbian Santo Daime participant said she wished the church members would “drop their homophobia and be happy for me when I’m in love.” A few men said they felt self-conscious revealing his sexual orientation to people in South America due to homophobia there.

Other themes of discomfort included the physical discomfort that comes from drinking ayahuasca; vomiting, diarrhea, bodily pain, the feeling that the ceremony will never end, feelings of fear, the difficulty of making time to participate in rituals, and feeling bored in rituals. One person commented on

feeling uncomfortable that others at his job where he works as a nurse might judge him for taking drugs, and another noted legal aspects as a concern.

Responses I: Perception of Externally Appreciable Change

When asked what others would think was different about them since they first started drinking ayahuasca, participants mostly recounted positive changes, such as seeming more confident, being more open and present, less likely to react in anger, appearing more peaceful and mellow, more self-aware, listening better, having less angst, being more honest about negative things, having deeper and more meaningful conversations, and being better able to express themselves.

Two participants said that they thought others were wondering about what they were doing that had made such positive improvements. One said, “A lot of people are saying, ‘what’s this guy drinking? What Kool-Aid is he drinking?’ They are starting to get curious.... They say I look great. I’m beaming; I’m exuding something they are curious about. It’s a much better place.”

A few respondents could not think of changes others might have noticed. One said that he had stopped boring his friends with talk about church, another that he was not currently seeing anyone he knew from before he drank ayahuasca.

Responses J: Changes in Future Use

Although several participants said they would continue to use ayahuasca, some also said they saw their use decreasing, either due to time or money considerations, or because they had gotten what they had been searching for. As one participant put it, “If you want work to continue, you need to find ways to support it, legally, financially, monetarily, spiritually.”

Shamanic participants drank less frequently and were sometimes reliant on trips to South America, which used considerable resources. Some expressed interest in bringing back ayahuasca to share in their communities, including specifically for two participants, to gay people who have been traumatized by an oppressive culture. Another was sure he would continue to drink for the rest of his life, and would make that a priority, assisting the shaman in ceremonies to defray costs. The Native American lesbian included in this research felt she would not be doing ayahuasca again, and would focus on understanding and participating in her own indigenous traditions.

Some members of Santo Daime, who for the most part drink more often than shamanic practitioners, talked about balancing this aspect of their life with other pursuits. One man said he would continue to participate in Santo Daime but possibly include shamanic circles as well. A lesbian said she thought she would participate less, comparing ayahuasca to training wheels on a bicycle that would not longer be necessary once she had learned to ride. She said that she loved the medicine but did not want to be dependent on it. A gay couple had plans to move to New Zealand, a place they had chosen partly because of the presence of a Santo Daime church in the town they were moving to. One woman who had relocated to Africa said she was interested in exploring iboga, an hallucinogen native to the continent, because there are no Santo Daime churches in Africa. She saw her future use of ayahuasca as sporadic, depending on accessibility.

Summary of Results

Participants reported experiences that changed their lives in positive ways in environments that, even when culturally disapproving of homosexuality, they felt supported them. Ayahuasca users in all modalities (shamanic, Santo Daime and Ogboni Ifa) felt their sexual orientation was affirmed by their participation in ayahuasca rituals. Respondents felt a reinforcement of positive perspectives in their lives, feeling inspired by ayahuasca rituals to eat more healthily, refrain from addictive behaviors, and to deepen personal relationships and approach them with greater discernment. The sexual aspect of participants' lives was enhanced by an increased desire for interpersonal connection and a lessening of feelings of guilt and internalized homophobia, but in some others this aspect was diminished as the sexual aspect of their lives lost its prominence and was replaced by a spiritual emphasis. All participants, including two who stopped identifying as atheists after using ayahuasca, noted enhancement of spirituality. Participants interpreted dogma in ways that enhanced self-acceptance and disregarded doctrine that was judgmental.

It is important to note the influence of the selection process on the participants and the bias that may be inherent in their responses. Participants were generally enthusiasts in regard to ayahuasca who sometimes had high levels of devotion and commitment to their practices. They read newsletters and websites about ayahuasca, and so it is likely that they had strong interest likely linked to positive experiences with the tea. They might be characterized as “spiritual seekers” who may already have a bias in their mental constitutions to religious

experience, or to make religious or spiritual sense of their experiences. In addition, there may also be a feeling of evangelism. Although evangelism is frowned on by the churches, the intensity of the ayahuasca experience can create the desire to encourage others to partake of the magic of the ayahuasca ritual and to literally and figuratively “sing the praises” of ayahuasca. Glowing reports of the effects and a minimizing of negative aspects of the experience might be a factor in the responses obtained.

Discussion

The results of this study point to the potential for ayahuasca to enhance gay and lesbian individuals' self-acceptance, to deepen their relationships, and to help them to re-define themselves in a positive way. The interviews revealed participants who were profoundly affected by their ayahuasca use, who spoke about it in reverential terms, and who were eager to describe the transformations they experienced through their practices. Investigation into the effect on identity brought to light the powerful effect of ayahuasca-induced spiritual experiences on self-acceptance, including an acceptance of one's sexual orientation. Positive effects were described in several areas of life, but the underlying motivator seemed to be greater appreciation for, and even amazement at, life and one's role in it. Regardless of the ritual environment it was used in, ayahuasca seemed to grant the participants a new perspective from which to reflect in a positive way on their identity. Using ideas from Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism, Integral theory, indigenous belief systems, and other spiritual and religious paradigms, participants described their experiences of transformation either in the language and jargon of their ritual tradition, in psychological terms, or in wholly original constructs devised to express original insights.

The participants largely relied on their own interpretations of their ayahuasca experiences. Even those in Santo Daime who participated in strongly Christian rituals dismissed or re-interpreted elements of dogma that were unsupportive of gay or lesbian sexual orientation. Participants in Santo Daime,

shamanic ceremonies, and the Ogboni Ifa tradition 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, enhanced family relationships, and improved physical health.

In contrast to past studies mentioned in the literature review in which gay people were treated with psychedelics to help “cure” them of their sexual orientation, participants in this study were helped to accept and affirm their orientation by participation in ayahuasca rituals. This suggests that even in settings in Brazil and Peru in which participants perceived homophobia, outcomes of the rituals were affirming of these participants’ same-sex orientation. It should be noted that many participants in the ayahuasca churches in Brazil do not experience this same affirmation, to the point that some have been inspired by their experiences in Santo Daime and the União do Vegetal churches to become asexual or to marry and adopt heterosexual lifestyles (personal communication, Edward MacRae, 2009; Beatriz Labate, 2010).

While the anecdotal reports from Brazil seem to support the idea of using psychedelics to “correct” homosexuality, the strong influence of cultural “set and setting” on these experiences is a notable consideration. It may be that ayahuasca opens a space for ritual participants to examine themselves from a new perspective, enhancing desires for community and commitment, which may override individual desire for sexual self-expression. In countries where gay people have little protective community of their own and publicly recognized

commitment is not an option, the religious communities which revolve around ayahuasca use may inspire gay people to try to fit in with the heterosexual family ideals which are promoted as antidotes to modern problems in the “world of illusion.”

As was noted in the Methods section, the bias resulting from requesting self-identified lesbians and gay men to respond makes a pre-existing positive outlook on same-sex orientation from participants more likely. This may point to the tendency of ayahuasca to possibly reinforce ideas already present and to reveal different “truths,” or to experientially deepen previous convictions, depending on the established beliefs of ritual participants. Because it is a psychoactive drug, ayahuasca can be presumed to be of interest initially to those who are less conventional, have past experiences with psychedelics, and who are more likely to have unorthodox or liberal views. In South America, on the contrary, Santo Daime in particular was developed among residents of the cities in Acre and the Amazon who were more likely to have traditional, conservative views on social issues and be influenced by the folk-Catholicism of the area (Silva Sa, 2010).

No participants were interviewed who were members of the União do Vegetal, and this church officially refused to participate in this research, so no conclusions can be drawn except to note the official stance of the church against homosexuality and gay marriage. In addition, no “ex-gays” from any ayahuasca tradition were interviewed; this would prove a fascinating area of research to contrast with the results obtained in this study, perhaps providing insight into how

experiences with ayahuasca may have reinforced their convictions in a different direction from the participants in this study. It may also be assumed that no gay people who had had bad experiences with ayahuasca would be subscribing to ayahuasca newsletters or reading ayahuasca forums on the Internet where recruitment notices were posted for long, so a positive bias for the ayahuasca experience may also exist in this study.

The women interviewed from Santo Daime expressed dislike of patriarchal paradigms and dissatisfaction with the church's refusal to reprimand one leader who was accused of multiple sexual improprieties with women. Two out of the three female participants from Santo Daime said they found healing from childhood sexual abuse through their participation in ayahuasca rituals. The clash between cultures that are permissive regarding the sexual transgressions of men against women and those in which women's rights and intolerance for sexual harassment are upheld reveals a disparity in the acceptance of patriarchy in which women from the United States can feel alienated by rituals run by South American men. The reports of healing from sexual abuse run directly counter to reports of sexual exploitation that were mentioned as concerns for some participants in both shamanic and church environments. The clash between the internal experiences of healing from sexual abuse and the external imposition of alien sexual mores points again to the sensitive intersection of sexuality and spirituality that can be part of an ayahuasca experience. Although sexuality constitutes a giant motivator for human behavior, the effect of gender and sexual

orientation on outcomes in psychedelic research has rarely been considered (Tolbert, 2003).

Even among the few participants who did not wish to pursue continued regular ayahuasca use, the effects in all areas explored were positive. Some found it hard to overstate the impact ayahuasca had on their lives, and several chose to orient their lives around its use. Some saw it as a temporary medicine that was useful to help them understand important issues but was no longer an essential tool; they felt they had absorbed the lessons it had to teach and they could now proceed to implement them. Respondents who participated in shamanic circles and in the Santo Daime church often were inspired to high levels of commitment which reflected a strong feeling of community inclusion and support. Two shamanic circle participants, one man and one woman, expressed a desire to bring ayahuasca to gay and lesbian communities because they felt they would specifically benefit from using it due to the need for healing among this group.

Seven of the 17 participants noted past problems with drugs or alcohol (see Appendix E), and although some had already resolved issues of abuse by the time they first drank ayahuasca, the ability of ayahuasca to give insight into addictive behavior was noted by several respondents. A number of participants made reference to improved physical health, or focused on a new relationship to their bodies. The increased health and feelings of responsibility and connection to their bodies and physical well-being, sometimes instigated by *dietas*, are ways that participation in ayahuasca rituals may specifically aid people with substance abuse problems, which are found in a higher percentage among gays and lesbians

(APA, 2010). Several participants also said they felt a new control over addictions and compulsions and discussed insights into cause-and-effect relationships between habits and well-being. In addition, they gained interest in exploring and confronting emotional issues, which may reduce the feeling of needing to escape by use of substances or addictive behavior. Finally, the increase in community activities, and deepening of relationships noted by several participants, runs strongly against the isolation of addiction. Participating appropriately in a community that has spiritual values reinforced by ideas of corporeal purity was a strong incentive for some participants to re-align their values and relinquish old habits of avoidance or hedonism.

The route that participants took to arrive at the form of ayahuasca services they participated in was usually one of personal referral. It was not usually the case that participants intentionally chose to seek out either a church or shamanic setting. Instead, an acquaintance invited them or they heard about it through a social network. It is hard to make a generalization about gay people seeking shamanic ceremonies because they expected the leaders of the ceremonies would be more welcoming to gay people, but it might be assumed that individuals who had negative associations with the homophobia of Christian churches might not be eager to attend one, and some responses from participants indicate some aversion to a Christian format for ayahuasca ceremonies. This suggests that the ayahuasca churches will more likely be sought by those for whom Christian theology is not a barrier, while shamanic circles may appeal to some because of the absence of Christian dogma.

The most marked difference in responses between shamanic circle members and church members was in the area of comfort with beliefs of the group about homosexuality. Yet, as was noted, most Santo Daime members simply disregarded aspects that they found objectionable in the Christian doctrine. The nature of the positive effects of participation in ayahuasca rituals noted above was basically the same for both shamanic and church users. Most participants said their sexual orientation was not an issue for other group members in North America and Europe, or even described it as an asset, although one man noted some slight feelings of discomfort among heterosexual Santo Daime men in the USA. Several participants said they had few other gay members with which to associate, and while some said they felt an affinity for other gay group members and sought them out, others said that sexual orientation was secondary to them and that they made choices about who to affiliate with outside of ceremonies based on other things.

Based on the responses generated in these interviews, ayahuasca consumed in both shamanic ceremonies and in Christian religious settings has a markedly positive effect. This effect may be considered to be related to both the effects of the ayahuasca itself as well as the supportive environments in which it is consumed. It can be noted that a broad spectrum of heterosexual users of ayahuasca in several different contexts have experienced positive effects as well (Metzner, 1999; Santos et al, 2007; Kjellgren et al., 2009), but this is the first study to look specifically at the effect on gay identity. Gay and lesbian ayahuasca users mentioned affirmation of identity in general but also, when queried,

specifically positive affirmation of sexual orientation, most specifically in those who seemed to have the most questions or felt the most unsure of this aspect of their identity. In fact, those who said they were entirely comfortable with their orientation noted the least effect of ritual ayahuasca experiences on their identity in relation to sexual orientation. One might imagine that were heterosexual participants asked in a survey if ayahuasca had an effect on how they thought of their sexual orientation, they might respond in a way similar to the gay and lesbian participants who were more comfortable with their orientation; that they did not think about it or that it was not a concern. However, for the gay participants who repeatedly asked God if their orientation was acceptable, or who were not out about their orientation to others, these ayahuasca experiences gave positive and strongly affirmation of this aspect of their identity. Being surrounded in a ritual by people who supported them, who they viewed as interested in their healing, and who were not expressly homophobic, also might be key to self-acceptance of sexual orientation, and this atmosphere might not be available in South American countries where, as several participants noted, homophobia is much more present.

Clinical Implications

The clinical implications of these positive findings may include recommendations for treatment using ayahuasca in a controlled setting. What this setting would consist of is a matter of debate among ayahuasca researchers (Riba & Barbanj, 2005). Can shamanic rituals or church settings be appropriate places for treatment, or are hospitals and psychiatrists better able to produce positive

outcomes for those seeking treatment for addictions or depression? Can hospitals be sites of spiritual renewal, which seems to be a crucial component to the healing aspects of ayahuasca? While hospitals can create safety, and ensure that dosage is correct and patients are cared for, the elements that act as spiritual cues and tie the experience into archetypal mystical transformation would be missing. How crucial this element is to positive outcomes for patients could be determined with comparative research. Therapists might also have the option of working with clients who independently attend shamanic circles or ayahuasca church ceremonies, helping them use insights gained in ceremonies to make positive changes in their lives.

Therapy using ayahuasca is experimental and there are few forums for discussion of this due to the legal issues involved in ayahuasca use. However, ayahuasca has the potential for use as a tool by therapists who can help users integrate their ayahuasca experiences into their everyday lives. It may be possible for patients to set intentions in ayahuasca rituals to focus on a psychological theme or to open to exploration of material from the subconscious that may become a focus in therapy (Trichter, 2010). Issues of addiction might be particularly suited to treatment with ayahuasca, if the stigma the unfamiliar does not override therapeutic considerations. Finally, helping gay and lesbian clients to have increased self-acceptance may be one use that ayahuasca may be put to by therapists in the future; as seen from the responses of participants, this could be one of its more reliable affects, at least among North Americans.

Although ayahuasca is not recommended for people suffering from psychosis (Guimarães dos Santos & Strassman, 2011), its ability to shift perspectives and enhance spirituality in people who have other psychological issues has been shown to result in changes that users describe as profound and life changing. As the interviews with participants in this research revealed, multiple positive psychological and physical effects were realized as the result of ayahuasca rituals. Even in environments that have been traditionally critical of gay people, such as the Christian church setting of Santo Daime, gay ayahuasca drinkers found affirmation of their sexual identities and experienced deepening of relationships, a sense of purpose and an acceptance of themselves. This effect was common among all participants in this research and the enthusiasm and dedication with which most of the participants pursued this physically challenging, legally precarious and culturally foreign remedy speaks to the positive impact it has on their lives.

The mechanism by which ayahuasca affects self-perception is unknown, but it can be supposed that self-reflection, with the aid of a boost of serotonin, combined with perspectival shifts and sensory distortion facilitated by DMT, might open the ayahuasca drinker to new and positive self-perception. Intrapyschic conflicts about sexual orientation may be more easily resolved when self-esteem is high and group cohesion is strong. When the ritual co-participants in the group are seen as supportive, the effect may be enhanced. When the group is seen as opposed to elements of the identity that surface, it could be that ayahuasca can

also be used with the intention of the gay or lesbian person to change their ways to homogenize with the beliefs of their group.

Seen psycho-dynamically, ayahuasca may be minimizing the control of the ego over consciousness, allowing material from the subconscious to arise and be subject to the gaze of the superego, perhaps accounting for the episodes of life and habit review while in ayahuasca rituals (“examining the conscience”), as noted by several participants. At the same time, ayahuasca experiences seems to reassure drinkers about their value as people, and even confers upon some a feeling of being special or having an important mission. Here, the superego is softened and becomes approving and negative judgments are put aside. It seems then that after its exile, the ego returns in force, full of good intentions for health and optimism about the future. The catharsis and purging—physical and psychological—that can be part of an intense ayahuasca experience have their reward in the psychological afterglow following a ritual. This process has some analogy in the process of insight and catharsis described by Freud, a process that, within this paradigm, can sometimes be complicated by issues of transference with religious leaders or shamans (Trichter, 2010). Issues of resistance, of “fighting the medicine,” can also be compared to analytic resistance, where the threat of uncovering repressed matter becomes a source of anxiety.

As another example, a Gestalt approach to the process of healing in an ayahuasca session might entail an intention to stay in the moment, and to stop striving to change but rather accept what one is. As Arnold Beisser (1970) said of the purpose of Gestalt, “Briefly stated, it is this: that change occurs when one

becomes what he is, not when he tries to become what he is not.” This idea was echoed by some of the participants in their spontaneous responses to questions regarding identity. Working with this as a foundation, ayahuasca ritual experiences could be integrated into a holistic approach to psychological healing.

It should be remembered that the experiences in rituals are not the same as experiences in therapists’ offices, with or without psychoactive tea. Values upheld in western psychotherapy, such as client confidentiality and the taboo on healer/patient sexual contact, are sometimes assumed to be held by shamans or padrinhos, who are unfamiliar with these culturally foreign notions. Shamans may well be working with supernatural concepts wholly unfamiliar to the westerners who they treat.

Becoming aware of one’s repetitive patterns is the first step to gaining mastery over them, and this basic idea is shared across many therapeutic philosophies. As reported by the participants in this research, ayahuasca brings these patterns into focus, along with the confidence and conviction, at least during the ritual, that they can be changed. The challenges of integration remain for both those who experience insight in the therapy office or in the shamanic circle.

The gay and lesbian participants in this research had strong positive experiences of their identities, became willing to address their addictions, and felt a greater responsibility to others. These positive outcomes, sought by psychotherapists, and of the type often attributed to religious conversion or involvement, were stimulated by the use of the drink ayahuasca. In this way it can be argued that ayahuasca can be used clinically as a tool to engender spiritual

experiences in gay clients who have existential issues or in cases in which other psychedelics have been used, such as in end-of-life situations (Grob et al., 2011) and in coping with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. Issues of who would administer the tea and under what conditions, topics too extensive for this study to address, would have to be resolved.

The oppression that gay people experience in most religious settings has alienated them from these environments. Participating in public life, including religious ceremonies, has been a challenge for gay people worldwide. In the United States, gay people are gaining greater access to public life with the repeal of military restrictions on gays and movement nationwide on legalizing gay marriage. The participants in this research in North America have expectations of fairness and acceptance that gay people in South America do not have. Their experiences of self-acceptance and affirmation of their sexual orientation within a religious or spiritual context are made possible by social environments that offer the hope of full participation. The religious and cultural plurality that exists within the predominantly Christian culture of the United States encourages diversity and a questioning of religious and cultural values that discriminate against gay people. Because this research did not include participants from South America, it is impossible to make a knowledgeable comparison of the populations, but it may be that certain social conditions must obtain before inner mystical experiences are recognized as affirming of sexual orientation. It could be that religious and cultural advances must be made hand in hand with political and legal progress, and that recognition of the sacred nature of diverse

expressions of love can come only with the hope that such acknowledgment will not be met with violence or crushed with shaming. Despite implicitly judgmental attitudes of the church setting in which the tea was consumed, gays and lesbians still experienced an affirmation of their identities and an increased tolerance for other perspectives. Perhaps exploring whether or not heterosexual members of these churches experienced a similar expansion of tolerance would yield some interesting insights into prejudice.

Implications for Public Policy

Making the connection between religious experiences induced by hallucinogens and those which are achieved by virtue of character or sacrifice is controversial, but the texts cited in the literature review (Alper, 2006; Doblin, 1991; Shanon, 2008) indicate that these experiences can have similar impacts on the perceptions of those who have them. Participants in this research indicated increases in desires to help others, connect more closely with family and friends, end addictions, and to behave in more loving and less hostile ways. Even in shamanic circles where no dogma is preached, positive attitudes toward community, feelings of increased responsibility to others, and deep humility towards spiritual ideals were stated. The fight for the right to use ayahuasca has had some victories worldwide as courts have examined the positive effect ritual drinking has on the lives of those who practice it (Meyer, 2009). When formulating policy on the use of ayahuasca, research such as this, which indicates strongly positive effects, should be taken into account.

As gay people become more integrated into public life, and as gay relationships become recognized and the bulwark of prejudice in the military is under review, religious teaching which is inclusive will become increasingly meaningful to more people, both gay and straight. Orthodox schools will continue to decry the authority of individuals to make changes to traditions that have become outdated, but such rigidity is alienating in a world of plurality, and may push those who don't fit in to seek other avenues, such as shamanic ceremonies or entheogen use, which offer direct avenues to spiritual experiences, as alternatives to dogma that does not resonate. Although the judgments of others, usually from a moral or religious standpoint, have lead to suicide, self-hatred and painful attempts to change orientation, the impact of spirituality and religion on homosexuals does not need to be oppressive.

The use of ayahuasca provides a spiritual opportunity for gay people that goes beyond cultural and religious boundaries, and gives users the ability to see and make choices in directions that feel healthy and honest for them. Making ayahuasca available for therapeutic and ritual use would provide a valuable avenue for personal and spiritual growth for this population.

Suggestions for Future Research

The results of this research point strongly to the possibility that in both shamanic settings and the Santo Daime church setting, gay and lesbian people in North America can have beneficial experiences with ayahuasca that enhance self-acceptance and deepen interpersonal relationships. Further research that might balance this picture could look at people in other cultural contexts where

homosexuality is less accepted. As was noted, Brazilian members of ayahuasca churches appear to have drawn different conclusions about their experiences than the participants in this research. Controlled laboratory research on the topic of gay and lesbian identity and ayahuasca use, most probably a far-off proposition, might eliminate the host of variables that complicate these conclusions. Recent research, including this study, seems to confirm ayahuasca's capacity to provide perspectival insights, often of a spiritual nature, that have positive outcomes in the lives of those who drink the tea. Further investigation into ayahuasca's capacity as a tool for personal transformation and self-acceptance is warranted.

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Appendix A

Consent to Participate

Consent to Participate in Confidential Psychological Interviews

I, _____ agree to participate as a volunteer in research for her dissertation being conducted by Clancy Cavnar, a doctoral student of psychology at John F. Kennedy University in Pleasant Hill, California.

I understand that my name and identifying information will not be connected to any information collected in the interviews. Because of the sensitive nature of the legal status of ayahuasca in various parts of the world, the researcher is very conscious of the need for confidentiality. Potential risks due to confidentiality breaches will be reduced or eliminated by assigning participants a code number and by keeping the data under lock and key, visible only to the researcher and her dissertation chair, to be destroyed at the conclusion of the data analysis.

Participants who experience any emotional or psychological disturbance as the result of their participation will be advised to contact the researcher for a referral to a mental health clinician. Participants in this research may benefit from a thorough examination of their own beliefs and experience. This information is being collected and analyzed to further understanding about the use of ayahuasca among minority sexual communities.

Participants will have the opportunity to see the results of the study at its conclusion. The research consists of a demographic questionnaire, followed by an audio-recorded interview lasting from one to one and one half hours, and a follow

up review of the transcript and clarifying questions taking less than one half hour.

There is no compensation for your participation.

If you have concerns or questions about your participation in this research, you may contact the chair of this dissertation or the Research Director of the Doctor of Psychology program at John F. Kennedy University, whose names and contact information are listed below:

Dr. Peter Van Oot, Project Chair	Dr. Sarah Carroll, Director of Research
Doctor of Psychology Program	Doctor of Psychology Program
John F. Kennedy University	John F. Kennedy University
100 Ellinwood Way	100 Ellinwood Way
Pleasant Hill, CA 94523	Pleasant Hill, CA 94523
925 969 3400	925 969 3400

I may choose to withdraw from the study at any time before or during the interview process without reprisal or penalty of any kind. I have read this form and agree to participate.

Signature of volunteer

Date

Signature of Researcher

Date

Signature of Dissertation Chair

Date

Appendix B

Demographic Questionnaire

Demographic Questionnaire

Gender : Female Male

Transgender Y N

How old are you? _____ Race/ethnicity _____

What state and county do you live in? _____

Where were you raised? _____

Do you have a religious or spiritual practice? Y N

What type? _____

Did you practice any in the past? Y N

If yes, what type? _____

How long ago? _____

Briefly, why did you stop?

Do you identify as (please circle): heterosexual gay

lesbian bisexual queer

something else? _____

Have you taken ayahuasca with at least one other person in past three years?

Y N How many times? _____

In your lifetime, in what environments have you taken ayahuasca? (circle all)

In a church

UDV x times _____ or more than 30 times

Santo Daime x times _____ or *more than 30 times*

Barquina x times _____ or *more than 30 times*

Other religious group x times _____ or *more than 30 times*

Name of group: _____

With a shaman x times _____ or *more than 30 times*

With a group without a shaman x times _____ or *more than 30 times*

What type of group was that? _____

Have you used any other drugs or mind-altering substances in the past three years?

Y N Which ones? _____

In your lifetime, have you used other drugs or mind-altering substances? Y N

Which ones? _____

Do you now or have you ever had a problem with drugs or alcohol? Y N

Now In the past

Alcohol Drugs (list) _____

Have you ever used other drugs or other mind-altering substances in a religious or spiritual context Y N

What was that context? _____

Appendix C

Participant Recruitment

Participant Recruitment

To Potential Participants:

This is a study of the experiences of self-identified gay and lesbian and people who have used ayahuasca in the past three years with at least one other person. Gay and lesbian participants are sought who have used ayahuasca in a variety of contexts. Interviews will be conducted which will last about one hour. The topic of the interviews will be your experiences and beliefs regarding ayahuasca.

These interviews will be audiotaped and then transcribed. All recordings and transcriptions will be assigned a code number and kept under lock and key, accessible only to the researcher. No identifying information will be collected. The recordings and all contact information will be destroyed once the project is completed. Confidentiality is assured. No payment will be made, but the researcher gratefully acknowledges your contribution to the exploration of this rarely researched topic. Participants will be contacted by phone or email to arrange a time and place for the interview.

Appendix D
Interview Questions

Questions for Interview of Gay and Lesbian Ayahuasca Drinkers

“Tell me about any experiences with ayahuasca or within the ayahuasca community that caused you to reflect on your sexual orientation.”

“Has there been a time when your use of ayahuasca affirmed your sexuality or sexual orientation?”

Tell me about that, when and how?

“Has there been a time when your use of ayahuasca caused you to question your sexuality or sexual orientation?”

Tell me about that, when and how?

“In what ways has your use of ayahuasca influenced your spiritual life?”

“What conclusions have you drawn about your sexual identity as a result of using ayahuasca?”

“Are you ‘out’ amongst the person or persons you drink ayahuasca with?”

Why or why not?

“Do you associate with other gay or lesbian members of your group outside of ceremonies?”

“What considerations did you take into account when deciding on a group or setting to take ayahuasca in?”

“Are there any aspects of your ayahuasca practice that you feel uncomfortable about?”

“Are you involved in an ayahuasca practice with a Christian foundation?”

Other foundation? If Christian, have you had any insights or experiences with ayahuasca regarding Christianity and sexuality? If other, have you had any experiences or insights regarding sexuality in relation to that?"

"Where did you gain your spiritual beliefs? What influenced them?"

"How do you see your use of ayahuasca affecting your spiritual beliefs?"

"What effect has your participation in ayahuasca ceremonies had on your life?"

"Did your perception of your identity change after you used ayahuasca?"

How?

"Have there been times in your life when you felt your sexual orientation was supported by your spiritual practices?"

"Are you comfortable with the beliefs around sexuality of your current spiritual practice? What would you change if you could change something?"

"How would you prefer to be supported in expressing your sexual identity?"

"Are you comfortable with the beliefs regarding sexuality of the person or persons you drank ayahuasca with? If no, what would you want to be different?"

"How has your view of your self changed since you drank ayahuasca?"

"How has your perception of your sexuality changed since you first drank ayahuasca?"

"What do you think others notice about you that might be different since you drank ayahuasca the first time?"

"What ways has your life changed due to your experiences drinking ayahuasca?"

"How do you see your sexual identity evolving?"

"How do you see your ayahuasca use continuing in the future?"

“Are there any changes you want to make in regard to your use of ayahuasca in the next year?”

Appendix E

Demographics Chart

Demographics Chart								
ID	Sexual Orientation	Age	Living in	Raised in	Race/Ethnicity	Practice	# times	Drug/etoh Problem in the past
1	Gay m	29	CA	CA	White	Shaman	8	no
2	Gay m	29	CA	CA	White	Shaman	11	pain killers
3	Gay m	28	CA	CA	White	Shaman	6	etoh, codeine, Vicodin
4	Lesbian	48	Africa	East coast	White	Shaman SD	20+ 10	no
5	Lesbian	32	CA	IL	Greek/Italian Jew	Shaman	15	no
6	Gay m	61	CA	CO	White	SD	30+	etoh
7	Lesbian	56	CA	NJ	White	SD Shaman	30+ 30+	no
8	Gay m	53	NY	IA	White	SD Shaman Friends	30+ 10 6	etoh, MDMA, crystal meth., sex
9	Queer f	32	CA	CA	Mexican/European	SD Shaman	30+ 1	no
10	Gay m	55	OR	IL	White	SD	30+	etoh
11	Bisexual f	21	CA	NM	Native American	Shaman	12	etoh, MDMA
12	Gay m	55	Canada	Canada	Anglo-Saxon	Shaman	30+	no
13	Gay m	55	CA	Italy	Caucasian	SD	30+	no
14	Gay m	47	FL	Brazil	Latin/Hispanic	Ile ale efu l'ase SD	10 1	no
15	Gay m	47	OR	CA	Caucasian	SD	30+	no
16	Gay m	58	Canada	Canada	White	Shaman	30+	no
17	Gay m	29	Panama	IL	Caucasian	Shaman	23	etoh, cocaine, porno

This table shows the sexual orientation, age, place of participants' residence, place of participants' birth, race/ethnicity, context of ayahuasca practice, years of practice, and cases of addiction or abuse of substances or behavior.