

Experiences of Encounters with Ayahuasca — “the Vine of the Soul”

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Abstract—Ayahuasca is a psychoactive brew used by the indigenous populations of the Amazon. The aim of this qualitative study was to gain insight into the experiences of western users of ayahuasca, as well as to ascertain the experienced meaning that participants felt by their participation. Twenty-five people from Northern Europe with experiences of group sessions with ayahuasca wrote anonymous descriptions of their experiences. The Empirical Phenomenological Psychological method was used for this analysis. The analysis resulted in 33 categories which were assembled into six general themes: (a) motivation and aim, (b) contractile frightening state (c) sudden transformation of the experience, (d) limitless expansive states with transcendental experiences, (f) reflections, and (g) changed worldview and new orientation to life. These themes provided a new structure, called the transcendental circle. Participants reported many positive psychological and physical improvements that indicate that ayahuasca could be of potential interest in the development of new medicines and therapies.

Keywords—altered states of consciousness, ayahuasca, personal development, psychedelic medicine, spirituality

Research about psychoactive substances have been far from mainstream since the 1960s, but there is currently renewed interest in the USA, the UK and Spain for this type of research within the areas of psychotherapy and treatment of post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), anxiety, depression, pain, abuse, and other destructive behaviors, as well as in the treatment of terminal cancer patients (Morris 2008).

Such a psychoactive substance is ayahuasca, used by the shamanistic indigenous populations of the Amazon basin for

ceremonies with healing and ritual aims (eg. Dobkin de Rios & Rumrill 2008; Luna 1986). The word *ayahuasca* comes from the Quechua language and can be translated as “the vine of the soul” or “the vine of death.” This brew is also known by several other names such as, *yage*, *hoasca* or *caapi*. Ayahuasca brew (or tea) is a mixture that is prepared by boiling at least two different plants together in water for several hours. Sometimes other plants can be added. The hallucinogen dimethyltryptamine (DMT) is part of the drink, a component that comes from the leaves of the *Psychotria viridis* bush. In addition, the drink contains a monoaminoxidase (MAO) inhibitor from the vine *Banisteriopsis caapi*. This MAO inhibitor causes the DMT to become psychoactive in an oral infusion (McKenna 2004; Riba et al. 2003; Callaway et al. 1999). Without the inclusion of this enzyme inhibitor, the gastro-intestinal enzymes would metabolize the DMT so that no psychoactive effect would result. Other combinations

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of plants containing DMT and MAO-inhibitors as well as additional plants can be used.

Ayahuasca is used as a legal psychoactive sacrament in Brazil within the religious organizations of Santo Daime, União do Vegetal, and Barquinha (Luna 2008a; Luna & White 2000; MacRae 1998; Grob et al. 1996). The use of ayahuasca within these churches has been examined by Grob (1996), da Silveira (2005) and Santos (2007) and their colleagues; psychiatric evaluation, personality tests, and neurophysiological evaluation of the members revealed high functional status and discovered no negative effects among the ayahuasca users. Significantly less use of alcohol was found among young people tied to the ayahuasca-using churches (Doering-Silveira et al. 2005). There are some studies showing that ayahuasca can have a therapeutically beneficial effect on alcoholics and other abusers of chemical substances (McKenna 2004; Grob et al. 1996).

Ayahuasca has become popular for both religious and spiritual purposes in the USA and interest in Europe is also on the rise. This interest has created a phenomenon sometimes known as drug tourism (Winkelman 2005; Dobkin de Rios 1994). People from industrialized, western nations travel to the Amazon in order to come in contact with traditionally used Indian drugs in the hope of acquiring an authentic experience (Uriely & Belhassen 2005). Even the Brazilian ayahuasca churches have expanded their work to North America and Europe, and are attracting ever more people (Csordas 2008; Dobkin de Rios & Rumrill 2008; Doering-Silveira et al. 2005).

Generally, ayahuasca is taken during group ceremonies, which are usually led by an experienced person in the field or a shaman. A typical ayahuasca ceremony is not only characterized by the brew's tremendously bitter flavor, but by lively, beautiful visions and visual effects. Other aspects are purely physical and tend to begin with a peculiar feeling in the body approximately 30 minutes after ingestion. This feeling can be described sometimes as an internal invasion, or as Shanon (2002: 56) has stated: "The sensation is of something heavy and viscous crawling through one's inner part, pressing and eventually taking possession of one's entire body." Frightening and terrible psychological experiences which participants describe as difficult inner battles are also common at the start of the ceremony. It is not uncommon that one believes one is about to die or is in the process of going insane. This initial phase often culminates with vomiting. The entire intestinal track can empty not only because participants experience vomiting, but also intense diarrhea. After this cleansing, a change in the character of the experience is often described: after this intense discomfort is over, a sense of euphoria, wonder and deep peace are reported. Sometimes, this state is filled with visionary experiences of various kinds. An ayahuasca session usually lasts approximately six hours.

There is no evidence that the use of ayahuasca is addictive (Gable 2007), perhaps partly due to the tremendously

bitter taste and the side effects of nausea, vomiting, and diarrhea. Shanon (2002: 56) reports: "The taste of Ayahuasca is the worst that they ever come across in their entire lives." There is little risk of physiological or psychological damage. No physical damage or increased cardiovascular risk has been found (Gable 2007).

A search on the word "ayahuasca" in Medline, PsychINFO and Biological Abstracts in December 2008 resulted in 164 matches, which indicates a certain amount of scientific interest in this subject. Despite comprehensive searches in scientific databases, few phenomenological articles have been found in terms of psychological experiences. However, a classical work that provides a fundamental phenomenological description of the ayahuasca experience is the book written by Shanon (2002). Several other descriptions are also found (Luna 2008b; Luna & White 2000; Luna & Amaringo 1993), as are a number of Internet sites where experiences with ayahuasca are discussed (e.g., www.Erowid.com; www.ayahuasca.com). Against the backdrop of a description of ayahuasca's impact as both terrifying and very difficult to endure, with both vomiting and frequently residual diarrhea, it appears strange that this brew seems to present such an allure to westerners that they voluntarily drink it.

The aim of this qualitative study is to gain certain insights into those experiences that westerners who have participated in group ceremonies with ayahuasca have had, as well as to ascertain the meaning that those participants have derived as a result of their participation in these ceremonies.

METHOD

Participants

Participants were recruited through three contact people with knowledge of persons who had participated in ayahuasca sessions; these contact people were from an earlier previously-established network (Kjellgren & Norlander 2001). A total of 25 people from northern Europe filled in and returned a questionnaire asking about experiences connected with participation in ayahuasca group sessions as well as certain background data. The average participant age was 43.56 years old ($SD = 10.39$), ranging from ages 22 to 63. On average, they had participated in ayahuasca ceremonies 17.00 times ($SD = 18.91$, ranging from 1–70 times). The gender distribution was 11 men and 14 women. The countries in which the respondents had participated in ayahuasca ceremonies included: Brazil, Peru, Ecuador, Spain, Belgium, Holland, England, and Denmark. The average lapse of time since last participation in a session was 310.21 days ($SD = 700.42$). Participants consumed fewer cigarettes (numbers: $M = 2.20$, $SD = 5.79$), beer (cans: $M = 0.80$, $SD = 2.21$), wine (bottles: $M = 0.32$, $SD = 0.59$), and spirits (centiliters: $M = 0.00$, $SD = 0.00$) compared with the average Swedish population over the course of one week.

Instrument

A questionnaire was constructed which elicited background data as well as answers to three questions about their ayahuasca experiences: (1) Explain if you had a special goal or aim in participating in the ayahuasca session, (2) Can you provide a description of what you went through, and finally, (3) Can you explain how this experience has impacted your life. Participants were guaranteed full anonymity. The questionnaire was constructed in accordance with Swedish ethical guidelines for psychological research.

Procedure

Through a previously used network of contacts (Kjellgren & Norlander 2001; Norlander, Kjellgren & Archer 2001) 30 questionnaires were distributed to three contact people who were in turn given the task of sending these questionnaires further, accompanied by postage paid reply envelopes, to people who participated at least once in an ayahuasca group session. From a total of 28 distributed questionnaires, 25 were returned by post within a two-week period. Data collection took place in January and February of 2008.

Processing the Data

The Empirical Phenomenological Psychological Method (EPP-method) devised by Gunnar Karlsson (1995) was used in processing the data. The EPP-method comprises an analysis in five steps:

Step 1. This stage involved reading respondents' descriptions carefully until a substantial understanding, overview, and "sense" of the material was obtained. The aim of this reading was to distinguish relevant psychological phenomenon. The reading excluded the aim of testing validity or any specific hypothesis.

Step 2. In the second step, the text was divided into smaller so-called meaning units (MUs). This division is not based upon any rules of grammar, but entirely upon the content the researcher discovers and at places where a suitable shift in meaning occurs. An example from one respondent yielding two MUs: "1/ 'Ayahuasca has shown me how everything is interconnected' and '2/ this has made me more empathetic and wise.'" This step yielded a total of 468 meaning units.

Step 3. During the third step, each MU was transformed from the language of the respondent to the language of the researcher. This transformation follows no specific rules, however everyday language is preferred to psychological terminology. The purpose is to make the implicit and underlying meaning of a phenomenon visible and explicit. The transformed MUs from above: 1/ The respondent perceives that ayahuasca has shown how everything is interconnected; 2/ The respondent experiences getting more empathetic and wise due to ayahuasca sessions.

Step 4. In the fourth step, the transformed MUs were synthesized into categories or situated structures. A total of

33 categories were generated. An attempt to describe and answer the questions "how" the phenomenon expresses itself (noesis), and "what" the phenomenon is (noema) were focused on during categorization. Each category illustrated a special perspective of the phenomena studied and was described by a synopsis. The categories or situated structures were developed during processing whereby repeated consultations of raw data continued in a hermeneutic manner.

Step 5. During this final step, the categories were moved into more general themes or typological structures. This was done through a procedure whereby the three authors independently organized the synopses into general themes, then jointly compared their results (which were strikingly similar), and finally agreed on the themes. The level of abstraction was decided upon, according to the principle that clarity should be attained without excessive detail. The purpose was to reflect at a more abstract level. The themes included categories that denoted various aspects of the experience of participating in ayahuasca sessions, for example: motivation and aim; sudden transformation of the experience; changed worldview and new orientation to life.

To monitor the reliability of the study results, the Norlander Credibility Test (NCT), designed for phenomenological analysis, was used (Edebol, Bood & Norlander 2008; Åsenlöf et al. 2007). It was conducted by randomly selecting five of the 33 categories. Thereafter, four of the MUs were randomly selected from each of the five categories. The material was then given to two independent assessors. Their assignment was to put the twenty MUs into the five different categories. One of the tests yielded an 86% agreement, and the other test yielded an 80% agreement. The overall agreement was thus 83%. According to Karlsson (1995), high validity is ensured by following the stages of the EPP method.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

During the course of the study six themes emerged, each consisting of several categories: (a) motivation and aim, (b) contractile frightening state, (c) sudden transformation of the experience, (d) limitless expansive states with transpersonal experiences, (f) reflections, and (g) changed world view and new orientation to life. The six themes recurred on a regular basis throughout the study and constitute a timeline. We will first discuss each theme separately and then describe the links between the different parts of the timeline and how those links develop into the transcendental circle.

Motivation and Aim

This theme describes various aspects of participation as well as motives for participating in ayahuasca sessions. Each of the participants underscored the importance of having an aim, and noted that participation was well thought

out and was not about recreational use of ayahuasca. The aims were clearly formulated and were preceded by various mental preparations, such as fasting or eating a special diet before the sessions. Seeking knowledge was one of the aims, as well as examining both outer and inner worlds and realities. Exploring the inner world could include the desire for transpersonal experiences. One reported aim was the hope of being transported in time in order to facilitate the acquisition of information from the past or even the future. Desires for healing or a cure were also reported, both for the participant and for others to whom the participant would convey the healing or cure. The main category in this theme involved desires for personal development. It is striking that so many appear to seek personal self-awareness by wanting to illuminate their dark sides or psychological patterns, with the hope that this illumination will lead to increased power, creativity and personal development.

Contractile Frightening State

The second theme summarizes various frightening and threatening experiences during the first half of the session, experienced as a contractile state, i.e., with reduced experienced freedom. During the introductory phase of the session (approximately 30 minutes after ingestion) participants noted clearly that something had begun to change. Changed perceptions, physical symptoms with chills and shaking, as well as experiences of having one's defenses peeled away, and thereby leaving one feeling vulnerable and easily influenced were all reported. The experiences thereafter deepened and the participants felt that they began to lose control over their world. This created strong fears and feelings of chaos and confusion, so overwhelming that at times participants were convinced they were going insane. These disturbing experiences caused them to regret their participation, but there was now no return from this point as the ayahuasca was already in their bodies. Feelings of regretting one's participation could even turn to paranoia. Participants also reported that they experienced being thrown back into traumatic childhood memories or that they relived other horrors from their own memories. It is well known that psychedelic influences result in a diminished psychological defense mechanism (Grof 1980) that facilitates the emergence of material of which one had been unaware. One participant related this well: "My defenses have been so strong, and I have a hard time imagining that I ever could have gone through such a wall without this medicine."

Sudden Transformation of the Experience

The third theme takes the least amount of space on the timeline and is described as a sudden shift in the character of the experience: "from hell to heaven." From the experience of finding oneself in a terribly disturbing, frightening state, suddenly one finds oneself abruptly in an experience that is instead limitless, omnipotent, and indescribable. This shift appears to take place directly following the experiences of

fears, paranoia, and terror that climaxes in intense vomiting. The majority of participants have noted this distinct shift. These accounts are in line with what Shanon has described previously (2002).

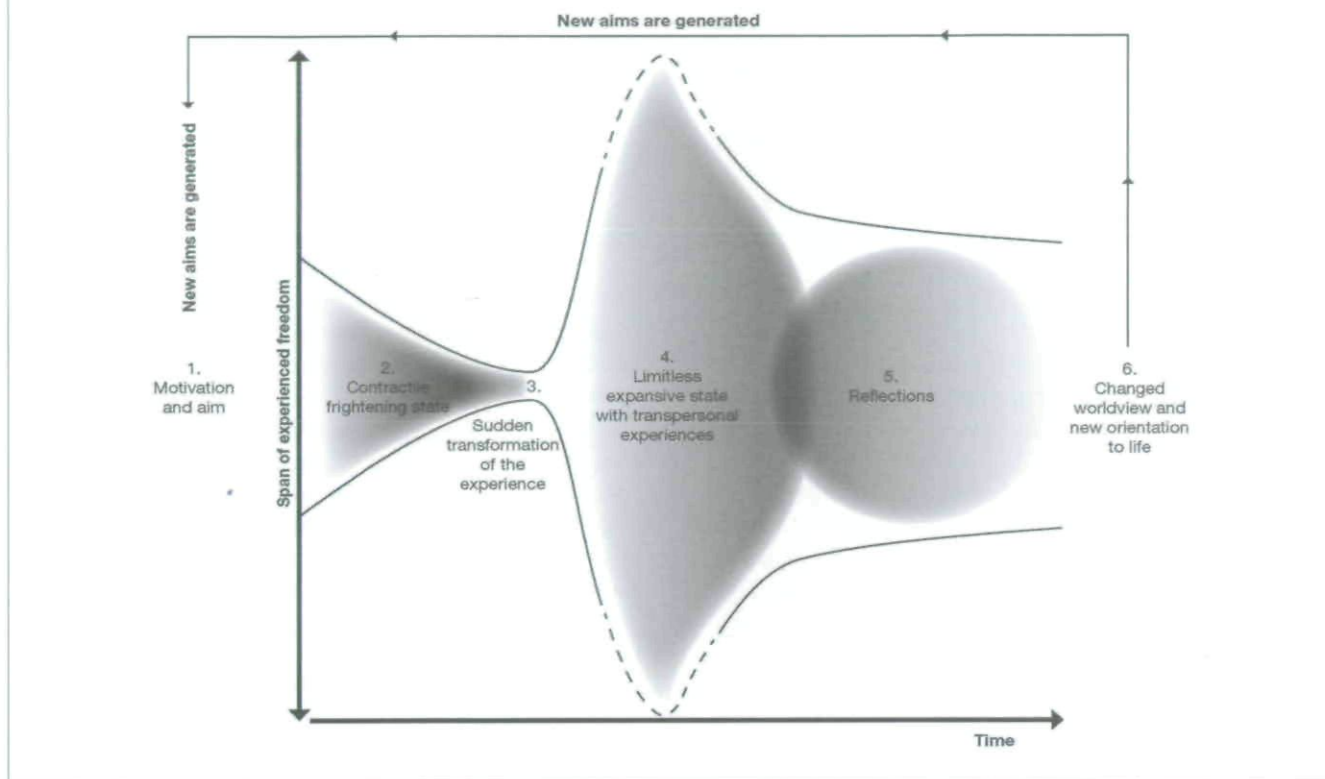
Limitless Expansive States with Transpersonal Experiences

The fourth theme deals with transpersonal phenomena in the experience world. Certain of these experiences can best be described as encounters with a spiritual world, such as experiences of meeting with some unknown greater entity or with various diverse beings. Participants have, in detail, described encounters with animal spirits (e.g. snake, ape, hawk) and, in certain cases, have described how they themselves were transformed into an animal. Animal spirits are seen as central to the shamanic tradition, and there are descriptions of the shaman being helped during his journey by the spirit of an animal (Eliade 1989; Harner 1989). Several participants expressed an interest in shamanism, and whether this influenced their experiences in this direction is unknown. It is well known that "set" (an individual's expectations before the drug influence) can color the experience (eg. Gustafson 1991). Other experiences that also can be classified as shamanic are encounters with the spirits of plant life. Not only is the spirit of ayahuasca encountered, but also meetings with the spirits of trees and other plant life are described. In encountering these plant entities, participants experienced that those plant beings helped the journey along and functioned as teachers who conveyed important knowledge ("plant teachers"). Even overwhelming experiences of direct personal contact with God have been described.

Other experiences that indicated that a powerfully altered state of consciousness had been induced were changes in time and space dimensions. The insight that "all is one" and that everything in creation is linked together was tangibly experienced. Participants experienced this as very striking, an acute experience that powerfully moved them. Experiences of tremendous beauty have been described. Even the presences of deep peace, bliss, and ecstasy have been described. These states have been interpreted as a loving primal state of origin; one participant wrote: "This state of origin is very, very loving—yes, maybe love just is!" It is plausible that such powerful, enjoyable states, in and of themselves, can impact one's worldview and foundational values.

There are accounts in the research literature of ayahuasca contributing to experiences of one's own death and death process (Luna 2008b; Luna & Amaringo 1993). Ayahuasca is sometimes even called the "vine of death." In the present study participants also provided descriptions of periods in which they experienced a process involving their own death, and in certain cases, of what happens thereafter (experiences of reincarnation). Participants spoke of acquiring the insight that during the death process, the mind will function approximately the way it does under the influ-

FIGURE 1
The Transcendental Circle



ence of ayahuasca; in other words, the mind is continually tempted to distraction and psychological defenses are gone, exemplified by this quote: "It is very easy at the beginning of the ayahuasca session to be diverted by distracting experiences. It is somewhat like the death process where the mind is continually coaxed into distraction." Interestingly enough, these experiences are not described as frightening or disturbing.

Reflections

The fifth theme encompasses participants' reflections on their experiences. Even before the sessions were concluded, participants reflected upon the unpleasant experiences they had previously experienced. Psychological interpretations were then derived that their own patterns of reaction to fear and struggle had been elucidated. Perhaps the struggle and fears participants experienced during the sessions can be seen as symbolic mirroring of their own life struggle, difficulties, and fear. After the sessions, they reflected upon the difficulties of describing the indescribable. It was stated that there were no relevant words available to describe the experience. There were even participants who were unwilling to attempt description; perhaps this unwillingness stems from the sense of impossibility of trying to put into words an indescribable experience for someone who has not themselves gone through the equivalent. There are also other spiritual traditions where it is held that one should not explain one's

experience to an outsider (Walsh 2001). There are reasons to believe that we have not obtained a comprehensive picture by way of the respondents' accounts; perhaps experiences that are less complicated to verbalize have been chosen and other portions have been deliberately excluded.

Changed Worldview and New Orientation to Life

The final theme addresses how participants have experienced that their lives are fundamentally changed, in terms of worldview, personal development, interests, and healing effects. The participants described a great diversity of positive changes in life. A greater self-awareness and a sense of being more present in oneself were experienced. Negative psychological patterns related to, for example, fear and abuse were reported to have decreased or disappeared. Participants reported having become more loving, and having learned to love themselves, others, and life more. Through this feeling of love, participants have found that better relationships have developed and that they have become more empathetic. Many healing effects have also been described as direct cures for both physical and psychological diagnoses of illness.

Creativity increased and even new interests surfaced in the lives of the participants. Frequently these new interests relate to nature and sometimes even to mythology. Improved cognitive abilities such as improved ability to survey complex problems were reported. Participants noted that they could also sort through and prioritize what was important

in their lives. Their worldviews were changed by expanding to embrace more nonmaterial aspects such as transpersonal states, spiritual contacts, after-life experiences and contacts with other dimensions that were previously not experienced. The inner world seemed more meaningful. A sense of knowing the world from within was expressed. For instance, one stated: "I feel deeper contact with everything, from within in some way." The transformed worldview is not always seen as something totally new, but rather as something that was previously known but had somehow been forgotten. This is exemplified in the following statement: "For me, it is like having come home; come home to myself."

Transcendental Circle

Through analysis of the material and six described themes, an understanding emerged that participation in ayahuasca ceremonies has become a process that can be described as a transcendental circle (see Figure 1). The process described by the respondents began with a conscious focus on preparation (motivation and aim) in order to, with the help of ayahuasca, deliberately work through personal questions despite the knowledge that it could lead to painful experiences, both in terms of physical discomfort as well as a spectrum of feelings of inner discomfort (contractile frightening state). Under the influence of ayahuasca, a sudden shift followed these disturbing experiences (sudden transformation of the experience) to indescribable experiences and transpersonal states (limitless expansive states with transpersonal experiences). Following these

experiences, participants reflected upon what previously had transpired during the experience. When comparisons were made between session experiences and participants' own biographies, new insights were gained (reflections). These insights derived from reflection facilitated a new orientation to life for the ayahuasca participants (changed worldview and new orientation to life). Finally, the circle was completed when new motivation and aims surfaced in advance of the next ayahuasca session.

Final Remarks

The current study has several limits, in part due to the fact that participants were completely anonymous, and, as a result, the impossibility of asking supplemental or in-depth questions. However, in comparisons with the previous literature on the effects of ayahuasca (Riba & Barbanoj 2005; Shanon 2002; Winkelman 2001) the respondents' experiences are in line with previous reports, though the transcendental circle has not been previously described. Suggestions for continued research could be to conduct in-depth interviews with various experienced ayahuasca users. Studies of how various psychiatric states, such as depression, addiction, and PTSD are impacted by ayahuasca would also be interesting to conduct.

Naturally, considerably more research in the area is needed. One must concur with those who stress a dispassionate, academic and evidence-based approach to the study of psychedelic medicine (Morris 2008).

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