

“ONE HEART”: PERSONAL INSIGHTS INTO SPIRITUAL DIMENSIONS OF PARTICIPATION IN CONTEMPORARY AYAHUASCA RITUALS

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It is almost 7 P.M. and a group of Westerners is sitting in the common area of a jungle retreat outside of Iquitos. The building is a huge rectangular “maloca” with a roof made of palm leaves. They are sitting around a table on metal rocking chairs made locally and conversation is rare. They are all nervous about their first ayahuasca ceremony. Some of their fellow travelers are already in the round ceremony house where the ayahuasca ceremony will take place. The few who are here are making jokes about the impossibility of preparing oneself for an ayahuasca experience.

As the time is closing in, they will make the short walk to the ceremony house together and settle in their respective seats. Shoes are not allowed in the ceremonial house. On the perimeter of the maloca individual mattresses are set up equipped with sheets, pillows, plastic buckets, and the indispensable toilet paper roll. In the middle of the room six chairs are placed where the shamans and apprentices are meant to sit. Some are already there. In front of the chairs on the floor is the altar, or mesa, a collection of various seemingly unrelated objects (including numerous large crystals) placed on a large square cloth. On one side of the room are the bathrooms and next to them the chairs where the “helpers” are going to sit. Their job is to assist the participants to the bathrooms, replace the buckets as well as pour water on the heads of anyone who needs it.

It’s hard not to notice the uneasiness that permeates the air. As everyone is settling down, the shamans are slowly coming in as well. Soon they will bless the ceremonial space and start dispensing the brew.

This scenario describes the apprehension just before a typical ayahuasca ceremony in the context of shamanic tourism. I often noticed this, and felt it myself, just before each ceremony. I naturally wondered why would

someone put themselves through such a challenging experience and risk having a horrific night, over and over again. Sometimes people would hold hands and encourage each other before a ceremony, others would meditate or pray. Others would chat nervously and joke about the impending journey on which they were about to embark. They wished each other good luck hoping that this would be a good night. Over time I came to realize that almost every night was perceived to be a good night in the end. Even the most challenging experiences seemed to have a beneficial outcome; especially difficult experiences seemed to have the most transformative effect on the participants.

In this chapter I will discuss some of the motives of shamanic tourists who participate in ceremonies utilizing the Amazonian entheogen *ayahuasca*, using data collected as part of my doctoral research in Iquitos, Peru, between 2003 and 2007. The main two motives I will address are healing and personal/spiritual transformation. The central goal of my research was to examine the ways in which *ayahuasca* is constructed and perceived by Westerners in the context of shamanic tourism. I participated in over 60 *ayahuasca* ceremonies in various contexts, including some retreats that specialize in *ayahuasca* tourism. I worked with nine *ayahuasqueros*,² interviewed 82 participants (mostly Westerners) and had informal conversations with several dozen more.

In my dissertation (Fotiou 2010) I showed that the Western interest in *ayahuasca* is much more than a pretext for drug use but rather has a spiritual component and seeks to address an urgent need for self-transformation. In the Iquitos milieu, shamanism is reinvented as local shamanic practices converge with Western ideas of spirituality and healing and create a hybrid and highly dynamic practice, which I call *shamanic tourism*. My main argument was that I do not see shamanic tourism as an anomaly but as consistent with the nature of shamanic knowledge, which has always been exchanged across and between cultures. Traditionally, in South American shamanism, power and symbolism has been sought outside a particular cultural milieu. Moreover, in the West, esoteric knowledge has often been sought in faraway places, thus this intercultural exchange is also consistent with Western tradition. This research offers a perspective that looks at shamanic tourism in the context of a new paradigm, or rather a shift in the discourse about plant entheogens, a discourse that tackles them as sacraments, in sharp contrast to chemical drugs. Even though the topic has been discussed in recent publications (Beyer 2009) there are few in-depth ethnographic studies of shamanic tourism available. Moreover, much of the existing literature has been quite condemning of this intercultural contact and rarely offers the perspective and the experience of the actual individuals involved.

SHAMANIC TOURISM

The so-called phenomenon of drug tourism (Dobkin de Rios 1994) in Amazonia can be traced back to the 1980s. The first mentions of it in the media and scholarly sources date as far back as the 1990s at the same time with the term "ayahuasca tourism." As early as 1980, "a California group was promoting a 'Shamans and Healers of Ecuador' tour at the rather steep price of \$1790 plus airfare" (Ott 1993). As one author (Grunwell 1998) comments: "Within the last fifteen years or so, a grass roots ayahuasca tourism industry has sprung up, with outposts all over Amazonia. Perhaps the ayahuasca tourism phenomenon is best understood as part of this culture, a culture that increasingly seeks to know itself and nature better, both as individual entities and interconnected systems."

I chose to use the term *shamanic tourism* as opposed to the more often used term *drug tourism* to refer to this phenomenon, because I see a substantial difference between the two. The latter tends to be used when speaking of the recreational consumption of drugs as well as travel to exotic places (popular destinations are Amsterdam, Southeast Asia, and South America) with the intention to smuggle illegal drugs. This is not the case with ayahuasca shamanism and at least one more researcher has pointed this out (Winkelman 2005). Even though there are tourists that will try the experience out of curiosity—because it is so widely talked about in Iquitos—most people will begin their quest with a specific motive in mind. The unpleasantness of the experience, physical and psychological, alone, disputes any claims for recreational use of ayahuasca. Finally, the experience often involves the participation to a shamanic *dieta*, which involves fasting and the ingestion of nonentheogenic plants. I have also come across the term "mystical tourism" (*turismo místico*) at least once in a short article in a Peruvian newspaper discussing ayahuasca and in two scholarly works (Hill 2005; Flores Ochoa 2010), but it seems to include a variety of activities that do not apply in this context; "spiritual tourism" has also been used for similar phenomena (Owen 2006), but encompasses a wider range of activities. I have also encountered "entheogen tourism" (Harvey and Wallis 2007), which is closer to ayahuasca tourism but does not necessarily account for the aspects of the shamanic experience I mentioned earlier. For these reasons, in this context the term *shamanic tourism* is more appropriate.

Many of my consultants would not be comfortable with the word "tourist" because of its negative connotations; anthropologists themselves have been ambivalent about studying tourists (Wallace 2005). Tourism is often associated with something superficial or detrimental and there is a hint of judgment when one is classified as a tourist. A lot has been written about the

negative effects of tourism (Nash 1996). It is no surprise that I was treated with suspicion when I told people I was studying tourists. I will not be using the word with any value judgment attached to it; rather I use the word tourism to signify any travel for any purpose or duration when the traveler has the intention of returning home.

Even though the ayahuasca experience is possible throughout the world, through the use of "ayahuasca analogues" (Ott 1994), people still take the expensive trip to South America with the expectation of having the "authentic" experience. For a long time, Iquitos was the ecotourism gateway to the Amazon. It is surrounded by a number of jungle lodges and is relatively close to a nature reserve (Pacaya Samiria). As interest in ayahuasca among Westerners increased, lodges started offering optional ayahuasca ceremonies as part of their ecotourism packages in the 1990s. Today, there are an increasing number of lodges that specialize in ayahuasca retreats. Most places focusing on ayahuasca ceremonies and catering to Westerners are on the road that leads from Iquitos to Nauta and is the only road connecting Iquitos to another town. Some more experienced ayahuasca drinkers will often participate in ceremonies held in the city in the house of a shaman.

It needs to be noted that the Iquitos ayahuasca scene has changed a lot since most of this data was collected. During my fieldwork between 2003 and 2005, there was a small but a steady flow of visitors who were in Iquitos specifically for ayahuasca. In 2005, an employee of the municipal tourist office told me that they estimate the number of ayahuasca tourists to be about 200 a year, a number that at the time seemed realistic based on my own observations. In the last few years after the end of my fieldwork, this number has probably doubled. One of the reasons for that is that in the summer of 2005 an American living in Iquitos had the idea of organizing an annual conference on shamanism in order to bring together scientists and shamans, providing a safe environment for first-time users to learn about ayahuasca and participate in ceremonies with local shamans between conference sessions. The first conference had 200 attendees with similar numbers in the subsequent years. This means that hundreds of new visitors started coming to Iquitos specifically for ayahuasca. Another event that spiked interest in ayahuasca and Iquitos was an article published in *National Geographic Travel* (Salak 2006), which made such an impression that it attracted an even greater number of visitors.

AYAHUASCA

Archaeological evidence of a drinking vessel of the Pastaza culture from Ecuador hints that ayahuasca use was well established in pre-Columbian times and that its use might date back to at least 2000 BC (Naranjo 1983,

1986). The term ayahuasca comes from Quechua, the language of the Inca Empire, today spoken in parts of Peru, Bolivia, Ecuador, Chile, and Argentina. Naranjo (1983) speculates that the term spread through pre-Colombian contact between Andean and Amazonian populations. Today ayahuasca is an important part of indigenous ethnomedicine and shamanism, and it is being used by several syncretic religions originating in Brazil (B. Labate 2001; B. C. Labate, Rose, and Santos 2008), and has expanded to the Western world.

Ayahuasca is consumed in the form of a brew, which is prepared from the stems of *Banisteriopsis caapi* or *Banisteriopsis inebrians* combined with other plants in order to induce a hallucinogenic experience. The *B. caapi* vine is indigenous to the western and northwestern Amazon. It is not certain where exactly it originated but today it is cultivated throughout the Amazon basin (Rätsch 2005). Its use has also spread westward across the Andes to several localities along the Pacific coast. It is unknown when it was first used but its use was first recorded in the 1960s by the ethnobotanist Homer Pinkley (Rätsch 2005). The second most important plant included in the ayahuasca brew is *Psychotria viridis* (Schultes and Hofmann 1979), a bush belonging in the Rubiaceae family, commonly referred to as chacruna in Peru. The principal alkaloid of *P. viridis* responsible for the visions in the ayahuasca experience is *N,N*-dimethyltryptamine (DMT), which is actually present in a number of plants—such as the widely distributed *Peganum harmala* (Syrian rue)—as well as the human brain (Strassman 2001). DMT by itself is not orally active, due to inactivation by peripheral monoamine oxidase (MAO) in the human gut and liver (Shulgin 1976; McKenna 1984); therefore it needs to be administered with an MAO inhibitor. *B. caapi* contains harmine and other β -carboline alkaloids, which are potent MAO inhibitors (Rivier and Lindgren 1972; McKenna 1984; Callaway et al. 1994, 1999), thus rendering DMT orally active.

For decades, ayahuasca was the stuff of legend associated with scientists and literary writers, from the pioneer field ethnobotanist Richard Evans Schultes to the poet Allen Ginsberg and writer William Burroughs. Today, its use has expanded to a global level and has had an enormous impact on religious and neoshamanic currents in the West. It has also attracted the attention of scientists internationally, who conduct research with ayahuasca in order to determine possible uses of it in the West. Ethnobotanist Ott offers a good example of emerging attitudes toward ayahuasca today when he writes that "the use of ayahuasca potions, more so than any other entheogenic drug we know, has survived the onslaught of literacy and acculturation, to make a place for itself in the New Order" (Ott 1993, 242).

Our knowledge of how ayahuasca affects the brain is limited by the fact that researchers who wish to conduct research with hallucinogens face a variety of regulatory challenges (McKenna 2004). However, even if we had a better

understanding of these processes it would still not explain the meaning different cultures assign to the experience. A quick review of first-person accounts soon reveals a theme of ambivalence toward the experience. Characteristically, Michael Taussig writes, "taking yagé³ is awful: the shaking, the vomiting, the nausea, the shitting, the tension. Yet it is a wondrous thing, awful and unstoppable" (Taussig 1987, 406). Usually unpleasant physical effects are followed or accompanied by overwhelming visions. Beyer (2009, 23–4) lists three phases in the ayahuasca experience: the first phase is dominated by geometric figures, the second by contact with the spirit world, and the third is quieter with physical symptoms lessening and more pleasant visions.

The effects of DMT, which provides the hallucinogenic effect in ayahuasca, as described by Strassman (2001) are sense of timelessness, loss of control, contact with other "beings" or "entities," feeling that another intelligence directs their minds, visions of unseen worlds, of DNA-like spirals, of jungle animals, etc. Like other psychedelics, it can induce states similar to mystical experiences. In addition to the visionary experience, ayahuasca causes sensitivity to light as well as violent vomiting and diarrhea, which are considered to cleanse the body. Many people report the perception of "parallel realities or universes" during an ayahuasca experience. Common visions mentioned in interviews were geometrical shapes, one's own death, and contact with non-human persons. People also reported that visions change very quickly and often it is very difficult to understand what one is looking at and even more difficult to remember all of it afterward. Change between light and darkness is often reported as well. One of the things that a shaman is able to do and everyone learns by experience is to control the visions—or to be more precise to "catch up" with them and make sense of them.

PILGRIMAGE

Pilgrimage and tourism have either been seen as related or essentially dissimilar (Cohen 1992, 48). While pilgrimage is travel for religious purposes, tourism is seen as a secular activity and for some scholars, pilgrimage and tourism have completely different goals and are therefore essentially dissimilar (Boorstin 1964). However, the permeability of the boundary between the two was pointed out by Victor and Edith Turner, when they wrote "a tourist is half a pilgrim, if a pilgrim is half a tourist" (1978, 20). Thus, for some scholars tourism is a quasi-pilgrimage during which the tourists engage with another culture to gain experiences they cannot have at home, and see tourism as a sacred quest for cultural significance (Graburn 1989; MacCannell 1973).

Because of the uniqueness of shamanic tourism and the spiritual pursuits embedded in it, I believe that it would be useful to look at it through the lens

of studies on *pilgrimage*. A pilgrimage has been defined as "a journey resulting from religious causes, externally to a holy site, and internally for spiritual purposes and internal understanding" (Barber 1993, 1). However, today it can also be viewed as a modern secular journey (Collins-Kreiner 2009). In looking at some of the anthropological literature on pilgrimage, one can easily spot commonalities between shamanic tourism and pilgrimage. The two major themes in my doctoral research (Fotiou 2010)—healing and the transformation of the self—seem to be central themes of pilgrimages around the world (Dubisch and Winkelman 2005). Other commonalities include the symbolism of the physical journey itself, the communication between the self and the sacred and the ritual structuring of experience. According to Morinis (1992, 4), pilgrimage is one's journey toward a physical place or emotional state that represents the ideals that a person wishes to achieve. During my fieldwork, it was clear that for the participants in ayahuasca ceremonies, there was both a physical and an emotional journey involved.

MOTIVES OF SHAMANIC TOURISTS

The first question that comes to mind when discussing shamanic tourism is who are the participants? Misconceptions abound but a closer look reveals no significant patterns in age, class, education, or social status. The only disparity I found was one of gender with more than twice as many men than women in my sample. This was unexpected, especially since according to other studies women are "disproportionately represented in New Age religious practices" (Brown 1997, 95). However, given the challenges that travel in South America poses for women this gender discrepancy makes sense. In addition, there are differences between shamanic tourism and the New Age. People interested in ayahuasca come from a variety of backgrounds. Some of my interviewees were middle-class professionals, and even though many of them were pursuing unconventional careers, for the most part they were people with regular jobs and commitments. Even though about half had no college education, all were well read. Many traveled to Iquitos specifically to take ayahuasca, while others found out about it while traveling and decided to try it. If the trip was made for the purpose of taking ayahuasca, then some reading of the numerous books on ayahuasca and shamanism had preceded. Contrary to what I was expecting, many of these participants had no prior use of hallucinogens. In the larger scheme of things, at the time of my doctoral research, this sacramental use of ayahuasca was embraced by a small, but increasing, part of Western society and a fraction of the tourist flow to Iquitos.

More specifically, among the people I interviewed were 60 males and 22 females. Their ages ranged from 20 to 61 years. Thirty-six, almost half,

were from the United States and Canada. Thirteen were Peruvian and the remaining were mostly from Europe. At least 23 said they never tried other hallucinogens before ayahuasca and more than half did not travel to South America or Iquitos specifically to try ayahuasca. Most were raised Christian but did not consider themselves religious, rather they preferred the term "spiritual" or used some other personalized term. The vast majority found out about ayahuasca either from friends or relatives, or books. Experience with ayahuasca also varied among my sample; I interviewed people who only had been in a couple of ceremonies and others who had been in hundreds. I need to caution that even though some of my findings and numbers might be typical for ayahuasca users, others are not. Some of these numbers would change considerably depending on the context in which they were collected. For example, if I had worked exclusively with people in one of the lodges that specialize in ayahuasca retreats, then I suspect I would have interviewed more people with no prior experience with hallucinogens, since inexperienced users tend to feel safer in the more structured environment of the lodge.

The next question and one that guided my research is "what are the motives of Westerners pursuing shamanic experiences"? I will focus specifically on healing and personal transformation the major themes that arose through the data. Some authors (Dobkin de Rios 1994, Grunwell 1998) attribute Western interest in ayahuasca to the fact that Westerners seek novel experiences not offered by their culture. Dobkin de Rios emphasizes "the empty self of the post-World War II period, a self which is soothed and made cohesive by becoming filled up by consuming food, consumer products, and experiences" (1994). This perspective does not leave any room for the possibility that Westerners might have meaningful or engaging ayahuasca experiences. Kristensen found four main reasons that people became ayahuasca tourists: self-exploration and spiritual growth, curiosity, physical and emotional healing, and the desire for a vacation to an exotic location (1998, 15). Some of these motives have been quoted as motives of tourism and pilgrimage as well (Dubisch and Winkelman 2005). My data shows that tourists' motives are far from naïve and there is a level of eclectic and often conscious selection of elements from indigenous spirituality and combined with elements from other spiritual traditions, they create a unique and dynamic discourse on spiritual transformation.

HEALING

A vast majority of participants in ayahuasca ceremonies are motivated by a desire to be healed and have reported successful healing from both psychological and physical ailments. Shamanism is seen as the most radically other

to Western biomedicine, when compared to other traditional ethnomedical practices (Bastien 1992, 93). It is not surprising that this is where people frustrated by Western medicine and medical paradigms will turn to, seeking a more holistic healing that is enabled by the greater contact to nature. In a sense, this quest for healing contains a critique of Western medical knowledge. I have addressed the healing aspects of ayahuasca rituals in a different publication (Fotiou 2012); therefore I will only do so here briefly.

Ayahuasca is reported to be especially effective in healing issues caused by past traumatic experiences as well as depression. It is also being used in the drug addiction rehabilitation clinic Takiwasi in the town of Tarapoto, Peru. Cleansing or purging is very important in the healing process and is perceived as spiritual, as well as physical cleansing. When purging during the ceremony, a crucial part of the ayahuasca experience, many have reported the feeling that they were purging the negative things accumulated in their bodies over years, often referred to as "psychic garbage." Ayahuasca is called *la purga* for the laxative and emetic effects it has that are considered an important element of healing. Cleansing also includes the removal of entities from the participants' bodies during the ceremony, negative energies that are perceived to "posses" the person. According to one of my consultants, "I think this whole purging experience definitely helped because you feel like emotionally these things coming out. I don't know if it's exactly logical, but it felt like you're getting rid of all the negative emotion, bad experiences, all the times you've been hurt, releasing things out. I think it's more beneficial than not."

What makes ayahuasca such an encompassing healing tool is the holistic approach of ayahuasca shamanism, its attempt to treat the whole person. One of the shamans I worked with used to say that ayahuasca is the best psychologist in the world; indeed many Westerners that seek ayahuasca today do so for psychological healing and some have seen benefits from it. However, she also emphasized before most ceremonies, that ayahuasca has three parts, meaning it works on three levels: the physical, the psychological, and the spiritual. According to this model, the physical is seen as intertwined to the psychological and the spiritual and not as separate realms. Using this model, shamans claim that they can cure anything, from cancer to a fragmented soul.

Even though among my interviewees the vast majority of participants did not pursue ayahuasca for healing, at least not to heal some specific ailment, the majority of participants did report some physical and psychological benefits. The people who were motivated by physical or psychological healing resorted to ayahuasca for problems that they have not been able to solve through biomedicine and conventional psychotherapy. These are some of the benefits that consultants recounted in interviews: cleansing, improved nerve problem on arm, headaches disappeared but came back after a month,

reduction of pylonidal cyst swelling, improved general well-being, helped with depression to the point where no more medication was needed, discontinued heart medication during the time in Iquitos (no follow-up), improved self-esteem, changed outlook on life, positive outlook, mental calm, realized things that would have taken longer to realize or years of therapy, and problems with sexual abuse from childhood and intimacy were solved.

PERSONAL TRANSFORMATION

One of the most commonly reported benefits of the participation in ayahuasca ceremonies among Westerners is self-transformation. In fact, through the numerous reports shared on the Internet or some popular articles (e.g., Salak 2006) this narrative of the often radical transformation of the self has become part of the ayahuasca mystique and the reason why many people will seek it in the first place. The possibility to radically transform and reconfigure the self has become so attractive that some centers specializing in ayahuasca retreats emphasize this as a central aspect of the experience. Participants have mentioned in interviews that it is an aspect even more important than visions and find that the act of stepping outside of one's culture, as well as the structure of the ritual, provides the best context for this transformation.

This stems from the belief that cultural conditioning in the West teaches rationality, materialism, and disbelief in spiritual reality, something that creates a void in need to be filled. For some, the ayahuasca experience poses a challenge and offers a greater spiritual experience as well as a way to connect to their "inner self." One consultant said that he was attracted by the fact that ayahuasca forces one to face one's "demons." Many of my consultants have made a distinction between ego and the higher self, a concept central in yoga as well as New Age teachings. The ego learns to function in society while the real self remains suppressed a fact that creates conflict. The hidden self needs to be found if one is to regain ownership of oneself. Several authors (e.g., Grof) have stressed the fact that psychedelic experience causes dissolution of the ego and is a catalyst for personal transformation and substances such as LSD have been used in psychotherapy successfully (Grinspoon and Bakalar 1981). As Baker (1994) has argued, because this type of experience challenges preconceived notions about the world and oneself, in proper context, it can be a powerful tool for restoring both individual and group equilibrium. Many people report that this process is more important than the visions induced by ayahuasca.

On the other hand, lack of context or a framework for Western people for interpreting the visionary experience can cause misinterpretations. In indigenous cultures, there is a very specific geography and structure of the

other worlds shamans visit in their trance, a structure that is learned during their apprenticeship. In a very Jungian manner, some Westerners interpret their visions in a more personal or psychological way. If this is the case, they interpret the beings or demons in their visions as manifestations of conflicts in their subconscious mind. While traditionally shamanism was a healing force for the community, in this context it becomes about healing the individual. I encountered what has been called "psychologizing the religious," using the cosmos as a tool for "therapizing the psyche" (Vitebsky 1995, 287), very often in my fieldwork. Kleinman (1986, 55-56) also speaks of a "psychologizing process," which has affected American culture since World War I, and forms part of a "cultural transformation in which the self has been culturally constituted as the now dominant Western ethnopsychology." These authors make the argument that the psyche replaces religion. With this movement from the cosmological to the psychological, the shamanic journey becomes not a journey to other worlds but a journey of the mind to the subconscious. Interpretations like this, however, are informed by the Western tendency to compartmentalize the psychological and the spiritual, something that is not the case in indigenous cultures. If there is a psychologizing process going on, I found that it is not a one-way street. Many Westerners who engage with Amazonian shamanism for an extended time end up interpreting what we would perceive as psychological processes in the West using the "spirit" vocabulary.

THE IMPORTANCE OF RITUAL

The expensive trip to Peru is rarely pursued merely to sample a potent entheogen, but it also aims to a personal transformation aided by the removal from the world and one's ordinary life. The transformation that occurs does not only include life-changing decisions and changes in life course but also a shift in one's personal paradigm, in the way that they perceive themselves and the world, which often includes seizing to see themselves as distinct from other beings by dissolving self boundaries. The ritual structure, the challenge of being in the jungle and receiving teaching in a nonverbal way seem to present the perfect context for reflection. This experience is then integrated in one's life history in a variety of ways and often it occupies a pivotal position in it. In numerous interviews, Westerners expressed that they felt Western culture not only discouraged people from "discovering themselves," but is also lacking in utilizing ritual in any constructive way. Thus, in order to access these things they had to step outside of their culture and experience what they perceived as timeless rituals. The use of ayahuasca further facilitated this by challenging their very cultural categories. In the following section I will provide examples of ayahuasca rituals focusing on the ways

ritual facilitates this transformation and the ways in which it is perceived in the context of shamanic tourism.

A survey of anthropological literature on ritual revealed that Victor Turner's (1969) model of antistructure and liminality was more useful than a Durkheimian model of ritual reinforcing social structure. Durkheim argued that "religion is a set of ideas and practices by which people sacralize the social structure and bonds of the community" (Bell 1997, 24) while ritual is what brings people together as a collective group. This is not an adequate theoretical framework for this study because we are dealing with ritual that challenges social order and has a strong transformational component. The concept of liminality comes from the Latin word *limen*, which means a threshold. Van Gennep's (1960) model of rites of passage includes a transitional or *liminal* phase, which he called "betwixt and between," during which a person is suspended in time and a place "symbolically outside the conventional sociocultural order" (Bell 1997, 36). *Liminality* refers to this stage; during this time there is a certain ambiguity because the person is between classifications not yet incorporated into a new identity or status and might not be limited by social expectations that come with certain roles. Van Gennep also emphasized the importance of rites of passage to the psychological well-being of individuals (Bell 1997, 37).

Participants in ayahuasca ceremonies experience liminality in two ways. Firstly, the ritual itself is a transition; it provides the liminal space, during which the normal perceptions of their life and the world are being challenged. Secondly, the entire trip to Peru is a liminal stage, during which they are separated from their regular life and after which they return home and are reintegrated into their lives, after having undergone a radical change. In this manner, the trip to Peru could be paralleled to the separation period, the actual ritual or dieta, to the liminal stage, and their return to their regular life to the reintegration phase. One can also identify a preliminal phase, which includes a period of strict dietary prohibitions. The ceremony itself can be seen as the liminal stage while afterward follows a period that could be identified as postliminal during which participants are expected to continue to observe certain dietary restrictions and continue working on their transformation and the integration of their experience. This can happen, for example, in dreams, etc. People can signify liminality in a variety of ways. In the course of an ayahuasca retreat for example, participants would report that they have experienced transformation and have expressed this symbolically by changing their appearance in some radical way. I have witnessed two cases of people who cut their hair right before or during an ayahuasca retreat. In one retreat, a man came to breakfast one day having shaved his beard which he had had for years. He shared that in the last few ceremonies he had been

through "shape shifting" and it was a spontaneous decision to shave his beard that morning. I also found that participants in ayahuasca ceremonies often experience what can be described as *communitas*, which Turner formulates in opposition to structure (1975). As opposed to rituals that intent to demarcate clear boundaries between groups, Turner (1975, 238) argues that in certain situations, "rituals may be performed in which egalitarian and cooperative behavior is characteristic, and in which secular distinctions of rank, office, and status are temporarily in abeyance or regarded as irrelevant." During this time *communitas* may spontaneously emerge between the members of the group and they may wish to temporarily "doff the masks, cloaks, apparel, and insignia of status" (Turner 1975, 243). In fact to maximize *communitas*, one has to minimize any external marks of status. People often described to me this exact feeling that during an ayahuasca ceremony they lost everything that identifies them within society and felt like "authentic" human beings. In the case of ayahuasca rituals, participants are physically temporarily away from their culture and their social roles; metaphorically they intentionally step outside culture by ingesting an entheogen that challenges the very cultural categories that they take for granted. In this context, they experience *communitas* and personal transformation. A viable theory of ritual for this context should account for rituals that capacitate personal transformation through temporary removal from social structure, but also by challenging cultural categories themselves through the ingestion of a powerful entheogen.

When discussing ritual change, Bell (1997) argues that a new paradigm of ritual has emerged, which I find a better point of departure for analyzing ayahuasca rituals. This model approaches ritual as a mode of expression, "a special type of language suited to what it is there to express, namely internal spiritual-emotional resources tied to our true identities but frequently unknown and undeveloped. Ritual expression of these internal dimensions will unleash their healing power for the self and others" (Bell 1997, 241). This is a paradigm of ritual that looks more inward, at internal processes of the self, rather than outward, at social structure. The dominant metaphors are those of wholeness and attainment (Bell 1997).

In the following section, I will show how the structure of the ritual as well as the discourse surrounding it facilitated this process.

CEREMONIES

I felt that I was doing something that had been done for thousands and thousands of years and I felt really connected with that, and I felt incredibly beautiful and I felt all the love and the energy of everyone in the room, and the beauty of the ceremony itself and I was just awed by how

beautiful it was. I was in tears by how beautiful it was, and how healing it was, and how profound everyone's experiences were.

This experience by a consultant exemplifies what I meant by the importance of *communitas* in an ayahuasca ceremony. Contemporary ayahuasca ceremonies are rather informal and anyone can participate. Traditionally all male members of the community were allowed to partake as long as they wished to. Furst argues that the communal partaking of the visionary experience is a "democratization of the shamanic experience" (Furst 1993, 222), even though the shaman is still perceived as the mediator between the world of humans and the world of the supernatural. Despite the fact that everyone is allowed to have access to this other world, it is still dangerous territory and necessitates the presence of the shaman, who apparently has the skills to navigate and manipulate this world through their alliances with certain spirits.

I observed a clear attempt to establish the intention of the participants at the beginning of the ceremony. Most of the times it was private, for example the shaman would encourage the participant to focus on their intention for the ceremony before they drank the brew. In one case, the participants had already met with the shaman in private during the day and had discussed their intention. Usually shamans would emphasize the importance of intention and would encourage participants to formulate one, even if it were something vague such as "straightening their energy." In some cases there was a public sharing of the intention with the group before the ceremony started. This way everyone's intention crystallized and solidified by being shared aloud with the group. Here are some of the stated intentions at one of the ceremonies I attended: "being by this huge river helps me to keep in mind my intention in coming here, which is the flow of life, the river, rather than go off on all these tributaries," "continue the work from the previous ceremonies, which was healing and working with my energy," "continue my healing and my rebirthing process," "remember my heart," or "vibrate with love."

Some shamans liked to give a speech before the ceremony to set the tone for the night or to give last-minute advice to participants. Many people would wear white during the ceremonies and it is recommended by some shamans as they can see the people in the dark more easily in case they need assistance. One shaman said when patients wear white he can see inside their bodies. When I asked participants about why they wore white they said that it was because this way they would stay pure. Despite this discrepancy in interpretation, wearing special attire in rituals is very common cross-culturally and demarcates this "time outside of time."

In most cases there was also an attempt to integrate or interpret the experience after the ceremony. Sometimes this was done immediately after the

ceremony, when people would take turns around the circle and share in a few words what the experience was like for them or what they learned that night. Most of the time, this was done in the morning in informal circles where participants would share their visions and insights in the presence of the shaman or an apprentice. In some cases, the shaman would interpret the visions and even share any visions or insights that they had the night before.

I will describe some of these rituals in the following text, focusing on the beginning and the closing of the ceremony, all of which are from the same "retreat." However, these are not meant to be representative, since the variety of styles and approaches is enormous. They are meant to give a taste of the small slice of this phenomenon that I had the chance to observe.

In this retreat, the participants knew each other and they came to Iquito as a group. The trip was organized by one of them from the United States. On the night of the first ceremony, the staff prepared the space by placing the tables (the ceremony was to be held in the lodge's dining room) around the room. People wearing white clothes started to arrive. The shaman burned *palo santo*⁶ and herbs and cleansed the space and made sure that everyone knew where the bathroom was. People started to take place on the cushions on the floor that were organized in the shape of an L. They would have to be comfortable for six hours. The shaman sat on the opposite side of the L shape. She had three bottles of ayahuasca in front of her, some small bottles of essential oils and a small plate with pieces of ginger. She also had two glasses in which she was going to serve ayahuasca.

The shaman first asked everyone to share how they felt at the moment. They all said how blessed and grateful they were to be there. Two people were taking ayahuasca for the first time and the group welcomed them. Some mentioned that they had been through a lot lately. Some shared how much they loved the people in the group. Someone cried at the end of his speech. A man said he wants to figure out some stuff about his relationship with his partner, why they are drifting apart, and how he can prevent this. Someone else mentioned serendipity, that the events that brought him there were not random. Some people said they felt they were supposed to be there—they were meant to be there—or that it felt right. Someone commented on how courageous his friend was to join him on this series of ceremonies. They were all happy to be there, they said that the place was beautiful, and they were happy to be close to nature. Some said that they had doubts about taking ayahuasca during the day, but not anymore.

Then the shaman gave a short speech. First, she welcomed everyone. She said that the ceremony was a celebration; "a way to find ourselves because life often does not let us, since our culture and our environment do not encourage it." She said that the ceremony was about "vibrating" positively. She

continued: "Because we become conscious that when we vibrate negatively for a long time we can harm ourselves, or become uncomfortable with ourselves. We can even make ourselves sick. Therefore by vibrating positively we help ourselves to transform the negative energy to positive. We are going to celebrate vibrating in a positive way. And our fears, we all have fears, learned fears, which are natural. Our fear is energy, which can be transformed into courage. We should breathe deeply and try not to fight the fear, but integrate it. We will invoke nature in general, the natural phenomena, the plants, the butterflies, the frogs that are here and sing for us, the crickets as well. At some moments we will be silent and let them sing for us."

Then she made them aware of where the bathroom was and encouraged them to maintain their space during the ceremony and try not to bother their neighbors. If someone had a difficult moment they were to try not to touch them but try to support them only through energy. She advised everyone to follow the songs and not "stray too far" because "they support us." She reminded everyone to breathe deeply and try to keep calm. She repeated that the ceremony was a celebration of healing; "we heal ourselves with kindness. We are connected through song, you don't need to know exactly what I'm saying; you can just follow along. I invite you to breathe deeply and open your heart to the medicine, leave the resistance, because we know that when we resist something, it persists. We are going to relax a little bit." She added that they could sing along with her as long as they are in harmony with the song. In the end, they would have the chance to sing and dance.⁵ At the end of the speech, the shaman explained a bit about ayahuasca for the two new people in the group. She talked about the two plants and she said that it means "death that lives" (*muerte que vive*), "because we have to die in order to live."

After the speech, the shaman shook the ayahuasca bottles and started serving the brew to the group. Later in the ceremony she offered participants a second cup and almost half of them took it. After drinking, some of them rubbed essential oils on their face and hands and they ate a piece of ginger to help with the bitterness and nausea.

The shaman waited a while before she started singing; she first whistled. She used a variety of instruments—panpipes, rattles and a drum—toward the end of the ceremony. During the ritual, she took care of everyone, for example she gave them toilet paper when they vomited. Sometimes she stood up and sang in front of someone. Toward the end, some people stood up and danced. In the end she asked if anyone wanted to sing and someone sang a blues song. Then someone else, who had previously participated in Native American ceremonies, sang a Native American song. Then the shaman asked them again to share how they felt. Some thanked everyone for their beauty, dancing, and singing. Someone said how important ritual is and that

we should incorporate it into our lives. This person had taken other hallucinogens but in this one he found that the ritual is as important as the medicine. He shared that he had a really profound experience. Some people also thanked the shaman. Someone reflected on the negative and positive parts of being a human being. Someone else also mentioned our weaknesses and imperfections. After the ceremony, most people went to sleep but some people stayed and talked in small groups.

At the beginning of the following ceremony at the same retreat, the shaman gave a speech, which was very touching for everyone in the group. In fact, everyone I talked to on the following day felt that the speech was addressing them specifically. She said that "we have a hard time dealing with negative things from our life; we should not fight these things but embrace them." She gave the example of a bad childhood, which she had herself. She commented that "all this is part of life and we cannot get rid of it—rather we need to transform it to something positive. It is energy and it cannot disappear, only transform to something else." She also said that everyone has a shaman inside and can heal themselves. They can also inspire other people and help them as well. She told the story of one of her trips to New York. She was with the leader of this group and a different group and they were doing some painting activities. She never thought that she could paint in her life and she wanted to just copy something and color it. But the group leader told her that she could do it, encouraged her to paint something and she ended up painting a beautiful butterfly. She said that it is key to believe in oneself and inspire other people.

At the end of the ceremony, people shared how they felt. Many people said it was the best ceremony they ever had and that it was different from others. They also expressed gratitude that they were there with each other. Someone said he learned a lot about himself, the others and the relationships between them. Someone said that we are all beautiful. Someone said that it was a pleasure to be there with everyone. Someone apologized if he was annoying people during the ceremony because he had an intense night. He thanked another participant for "holding his wings." He said he flew for the first time and it was not what he expected but it was great. He thanked another participant for her groundedness and added that he thought he was home. After the ceremony people ate fruit and talked in small groups.

Before the last ceremony in the same retreat the shaman gave a longer speech, in which she brought many of the same ideas together, weaving them with some of the events that had transpired during their stay at the lodge. People had started feeling tired and had demystified any romantic notions they had of the jungle. In this speech she commented on colonialism, connecting today's impoverishment of the area to the rubber boom era, and the loss of indigenous knowledge and the traditional way of life. She then talked

about the ways in which people can change the world by first transforming themselves. She closed with the message that what people are seeking is inside them and that is what ayahuasca reminds them; to go back to the self and discover their inner power and beauty.

What follows is the transcription of part of that speech:

"[L]et's open our heart to the experience. We are going to ingest once again the *purga*, mother ayahuasca, or "death that lives." When we drink, we keep changing, we leave our past behind, the past becomes less important than our present, we live in the present. Our emotions emerge; sadness, happiness, hatred, frustration etc. Also our environment influences us, for example when it does not let us rest properly. . . . To have health we have to have a healthy environment. When we don't rest very well, we don't feel as comfortable, we feel a little anxious. For all the inconveniences that we might have at the moment, we also have the conviction in us, the faith, that in the midst of all the interferences we can rest. Definitely sometimes our lives are challenging. Especially here, we have had in the past our tribes of which there are almost no traces; we are forgetting our way of life, a healthy way to live. We see in the tribes young people who don't have teeth, which means that the health is not very good. Also, we are forgetting how to use the plants, because we had a very difficult period with the exploitation of the rubber. We have all this surrounding us, some of us who might be more sensitive might be able to feel all this in the environment, because it's the energy. But our purpose is to heal ourselves inside, change our interior world. We are doing a lot if we start working on our own interior world. This way we can inspire other people to do the same. We speak of healing ourselves deeply and one day little by little to share. So we can start thinking of how to change the world around us, what to do. A good way is to begin within ourselves.

Also, if we want to help our world, let's not make chaos where there is chaos. So, let's sustain ourselves with our faith that we are light, we are love and despite the difficult moments and negative experiences, we can overcome them. With forgiveness—it's powerful when we forgive. Also acceptance—integrating everything, without separating things. When we accept and assimilate we can move on. It's important in our practices, our celebrations, our ceremonies, that we vibrate in a positive way that is beneficial for us. It's more important to have quality rather than quantity of life; if we have this quality of life, which is being positive. It's easy to be negative, but it's not healthy for us. We help ourselves when our feelings and thoughts are in accordance to our needs as living beings. In the 12 years of practice I've had, I learned that nothing and nobody in our universe can do nothing for ourselves if we don't allow it and we don't have that force of will. The

plants help us, but there are no miracles if we don't do our part and have will in our lives. Many times we have visions, the plants amplify what is inside us, but sometimes we don't accept the negative things that are inside us. We look at ourselves but don't see ourselves. It's easy to look at others instead of ourselves. Let's go deeply in our own universe and accept our negative things and transform them. As it helps us see them amplified we can recognize them and cultivate ourselves in a positive way. Cultivate our positivity, because when we vibrate more negatively we start feeling sick, pains etc.

I have met many people who come with all the pains in the world, and in reality their pain is emotional. It's an emotional pain when we don't forgive, when we hate. Thus, our celebration is a reflection on ourselves, a reflection that sometimes might seem silly, or something we can't accept. But by accepting ourselves deeply, as we are, we are also beautiful; we should not forget that. We should have faith and confidence that we are privileged. Because animals are not privileged. In our culture animals are not important; the plants neither. Despite the privileges that we have, we give ourselves the luxury of being unhappy. Thus, we should give thanks to nature and honor our lives and feel our privilege. Our life is a great gift if that's the way we see it—it's how we perceive it. We have a very powerful mind that can destroy, as well as create and cultivate.

Some people who come to the ceremonies, say, "ah how beautiful you are! You are an angel!" But it's what it's inside us that we see reflected on other people. Thus, especially in this celebration, as the medicine makes us very sensitive, we are together deeply and see ourselves. We have to remember that we are a reflection. . . . Sometimes I feel ugly and then I project it on others and I start seeing everyone else as ugly. We should be conscious of this. When this happens I tell myself to wait and analyze what I am feeling and thinking. I find that it is myself [that I see]. Thus, we cleanse our temple with love and heal ourselves. The lesson is that the plants remain in our hearts and help us to remember in our lives. Let's remember the lessons and practice in our lives. Our ceremonies last a few hours but after that our life continues. It continues and it is important to forgive ourselves and the others around us. Don't forget to smile, despite the difficulties, because it has been demonstrated that smiling is healing. When we laugh or sing our muscles relax. And when we are tense or angry our system is paralyzed. The blood does not circulate well. But when we smile and sing like the birds, it relaxes us.

A man was looking for love and happiness everywhere. He couldn't find it; he traveled to the Himalayas, looking for that powerful force that would give him happiness. He couldn't find it because it was inside him. This power is inside us and this is what the plants remind us. So we begin with a smile."

People who participated in these ceremonies were very conscious of the importance of ritual to them. One consultant said that for him the knowledge he got from ayahuasca was not as important. What was important was the love and the support he was getting from the group. A perfect example of *communitas*, which was also reinforced by the fact that the group members got to know each other and spent time together in a retreat.

DISCUSSION

For some critics, Western interest in shamanism is nothing more than a narcissistic worship or pursuit of the self. For example, Hamayon (2001) argues that while shamanism used to aim at collective benefit, today among Westerners it becomes centered on individual welfare (as though individual welfare is detached from collective welfare), while spirits are themselves disappearing. This is not entirely accurate in the case of ayahuasca, since numerous consultants report contact and respect for spiritual beings and nonhuman persons. However, it is true that while traditionally ayahuasca saturated all aspects of life, Westerners have a different agenda when pursuing it. Even though from an outsider's perspective, it might be perceived to be a selfish pursuit, from an emic perspective it is a personal project perceived to have larger implications. Healing of the self becomes a prerequisite of healing humanity; by transforming the self one contributes to the process of transforming society as a whole. The following examples from interviews illustrate this:

"My intention ultimately is healing and the pursuit of beauty and truth and connection. And again, to constantly remind myself that it's not a selfish pursuit, it's not just for me. It's for the world heart, the world soul, and I'm not talking like I'm a martyr or I'm more special and I'm doing this for the world and caring and that, it's for me, but I am the world. A lot of healing that goes on here. Also, it just helps me to remember my blueprint, you know? Remember, remember, remember, wake up, wake up, wake up, stay awake, stay awake. It helps me to recognize my brothers and sisters and to help them to remember why we're here and create us and the potential we have and having the blessing of being in our bodies and reuniting with each other. There's something with me here with the people, with the Quechua, the Andes, and I'm exploring that mysterious hunch I have about some of my origins and trying to reconnect with the sacred lands of the people of this area. I'm trying to understand, yeah, who I am. Who we are."

"Sometimes I'll also ask ayahuasca for information or healing for other people, as well. So, I will devote the session to others. Particularly, if I'm going through a difficult time in the session I often times have an intention

that I'm taking that on for other people who don't have the opportunity or the ability to do something like drink ayahuasca. So I do it on behalf of others."

"It's usually for acceptance, the ability to be more compassionate and loving and to develop a greater understanding of myself so that when I see something in someone else that provokes a response like I don't like that, that I recognize that it's in me too. So, just self-awareness. I always come back to just wanting to open to love and to the unity of things and to compassion and understanding."

In certain ayahuasca retreats there is a stronger emphasis on the personal transformation that the ayahuasca experience induces. To this effect discourse is dominated by a narrative that emphasizes personal transformation. For example, on the website of a well-known ayahuasca center, the words "transformation" and "transformational experiences" are mentioned often. Specifically, it is said that "[t]he ceremony is a time for spiritual transformation and spiritual growth, as the shaman practices the ancient medicine, guiding the ceremony through the use of icaros (sacred medicine songs)."⁶ In another part of the website it is stated that "in the presence of the true healers, real life transformation takes place"⁷ During the retreats and workshops this idea is reinforced by the shamans and apprentices sharing their own journeys and transformation sharing how ayahuasca changed their life. Participants are in this way prepared psychologically and mentally for a powerful and transformative experience. The stories of former participants that made radical changes in their lives after returning home from an ayahuasca retreat are also shared. Some of the participants I talked to did come to the retreat with this intention and the expectation of radical transformation for themselves and their lives.

As already discussed, ceremonies provide the ideal setting for personal transformation, by providing the liminal space that in turn challenges basic cultural assumptions. This stems from the belief that cultural conditioning in the West teaches rationality, materialism, and disbelief in spiritual reality, something that hinders self-development. Others reported encountering their "higher" self and the destruction of their old ego, or lower self. This is a known concept from Siberian shamanism, where the novice shaman feels "that the spirits are destroying his old ego, dissecting or boiling it, after which he is reassembled as a new shaman" (Siikala 1993, 211). Several consultants have reported similar death and rebirth experiences, which were interpreted as a spiritual regeneration for the self. Many people report that this process is more important than the visions induced by ayahuasca.

Overall, people commented that ayahuasca experiences had been some of the most significant experiences in their lives with a variety of effects. Here

are some of the things that participants said they learned through ayahuasca or ways that it has been valuable to them:

"It has changed my life completely. It is now a part of my life and will always remain so. Ayahuasca is not just a drug one takes, it is a part of one's life, it is a lifestyle for me. Even though I only have partaken 10 times over the last 19 months, there are not many days that pass that I do not think about it or things connected with it at least once."

"Giving me another viewpoint from which to see my circumstances I have a better understanding of myself and I have found my inner strength. I know now what I'm capable of. I used to have extremely high stress levels at work but after the ayahuasca experience I am more relaxed and take things as they come. I also realized that we have enough time for anything. I also had the courage to make a dream come true: to quit my job, sell my house and to take a year off to travel through South America."

"Ayahuasca is a teacher plant that takes you on a journey deep within yourself. It forces you to face your issues and with ayahuasca there are no half measures, it is all or nothing. Ayahuasca is a medicine that helps you to reconnect to your true self and in doing so, helps you to be all that you can be."

"For me it is a method of examining my life and the direction I am heading, understanding motives I have that might not be fully understood and utilizing it to improve my life."

"At this point ayahuasca for me is a lens or peephole that allows me extraordinary consciousness in areas of experience that I am familiar with but usually not as conscious or capable of remembering on return to waking consciousness. One aspect of it for me is that it works as a kind of check on the ego."

For the transformation of the self to occur, usually a personal paradigm shift has to happen first. Many people in fact have reported that the most important thing they got out of the ayahuasca experience was a change in the way they saw themselves, life and their relationships to other people, and most importantly, the way they see hallucinogens. Many of my interviewees felt that the Western mechanical and commercial paradigm has deprived modern man of a sense of spirituality that is a human need. They thought that the increasing interest in ayahuasca was part of a process that they described as a paradigm shift for Western culture. One of my consultants commented that people "want to clean their souls and get some of their soul back that they had lost in the First World and get closer to God, which I believe they can't find any more in organized religions that are around there." In addition, for most of the people interviewed, there has been a sort of personal paradigm

shift. They talked about how ayahuasca helped them break "cultural programming" and create a new self. However, it was believed that as more and more people participate in ayahuasca ceremonies and change their paradigms they will create a critical mass that will eventually change the cultural paradigm as well.

Most stressed the importance of the spiritual dimension of the self, an important concept discussed in the work of William James and Karl Jung. Similar ideas have been explored in contemporary psychology as well. Some of the experiences that consultants described to me were interpreted as tapping into what Jung referred to as the collective unconscious (Jung 1966), a part of the mind that contains the collective experiences of an individual's ancestors. As many of the visions described tend to be metaphorical, some of the subjects felt that they were in the form of archetypes, in other words "mental models that generate magico-religious images and myths whose similarities relate to their collective nature" (Cunningham 1999, 35). These archetypes for Jung contain themes and patterns of myth and ritual that are essential to a process he referred to as *individuation*, the process through which the individual can reach self-fulfillment. Many of my consultants described similar processes, even though they did not use the word individuation. Individuation is achieved by "resolving any contradictions in one's sense of self, by preparing the individual to face situations in life and by bringing forth the possibilities latent in the collective unconscious" (Cunningham 1999, 36).

In the ritual setting that I researched, many reported therapeutic experiences that helped resolve critical situations in their lives. They were able to "see" some of the people or situations that caused conflict and either successfully confront them or change the outcome. Many people shared that they had powerful insights about themselves and their relationships during ceremonies. One consultant said that in one of his first ceremonies he realized that power is not what he wanted, and that it was better for him to "go with the flow." He said that he learned that instead of pursuing power it is better to "just be pure." A practitioner of yoga found parallels between yoga and ayahuasca and said that yoga is like an ayahuasca ceremony; neither is about power or prestige but about "being true to your heart. By being in one's heart one realizes that we are all one—one heart." He added that through ayahuasca he came to understand yoga teachings that he had read about in books.

A lot of the times the visions people have are not directly related to their life. These include encounters with nonhuman persons of various forms. Contact with these entities is important in the learning process and since Westerners lack the framework to interpret them, they are perceived differently by different people (from demons or aliens to helping spirits, to elements of the psyche). Usually these entities play a role in the delivery of knowledge, or the personal transformation. People report experiences of their bodies being

"rebuilt" by entities—much like the way a machine would be repaired—or being helped by their protecting spirits. Some reported experiences of shape shifting into a plant or animal form, which enhanced the perception of the existence of intelligence in the plants and strengthened their relationship to other beings. While some participants interpreted these experiences using a Jungian perspective—interpreting them as metaphors for internal processes—more experienced participants, after just a handful of ceremonies, saw them as literal contact with spirits. Peters and Price-Williams (1980) argue that this is the basic difference between Western psychotherapy and shamanism; the latter sees spirits "as objective events" (1980, 405).

On the contrary, some of the Western shamans have adopted a shamanic model and interpret psychological processes using spirit discourse. For example, one of the shamans said:

"Everybody that has negative self critical voices, low self-esteem, all suffer from the same spirits. And you heal them in the ayahuasca sense by expelling those spirits out and those spirits when they come into ceremony they will try to get into another person's head. And when you are healing them they will even start talking bad things about you. "Your medicine doesn't work, you can't heal, what are you doing? This isn't going to work!" That's how they talk. And you grab them and you expel them. But depending on what's going on in ceremony, those can be in you, that you picked up somewhere throughout your life, transferred energy from some other person, or somebody who said that stuff to you or whatever, it's not difficult to figure out. And as they release they can go into somebody else. So the role of the master shaman in the ceremony is to expel them and to not let them go into the head of anybody else. So there is no transference of dark energy that is coming out of people's bodies they are purging in ceremony.

A dissolution of the boundaries of the self, or a feeling of connectedness to "everyone and everything" was often stated as a benefit from ayahuasca ceremonies. A communication or access to "otherness" seems to be at the core of the ayahuasca experience. This often takes the form of contact with other beings, which in the context of Amazonian shamanism are considered to be the spirits of the plants. These encounters are not always interpreted in a Jungian framework as psychological processes. One of the most meaningful experiences or insights that people have is that of connectedness to nature, which is perceived as a conscious being. Comparing ayahuasca to other hallucinogens a consultant said that with ayahuasca,

"you learn what it is to be a plant. You commune with the plants, you feel the vegetable kingdom coursing through your consciousness. It's a

vegetable experience, it's very much non-verbal. It's very much experiential. . . . It seems to be very vine-like, it seems to be this snaky vine movement through your body and through your mind and through your soul and . . . Most psychedelics make you think, think, think, think! So you run in circles. . . . With ayahuasca it's more visual and more experiential, it's vegetable in quality and you feel attuned into the energies, it feels like you are more in tune with your relationship to the ecosystem. It's impossible to talk about because it is vegetable in quality, and it's not in your head. I can talk about acid, I can talk about mushrooms, those things make me think. Ayahuasca doesn't make me think. It makes me experience. Of course there are thoughts. But they seem to be drowned out by the overwhelming experience."

Participants often said that this experience came with the realization that humans need to be kinder and more respectful to each other and everything around them. In the words of one of the participants, what she learned from ayahuasca was

"a confirmation of the intangible forces and beings that live around us and within us. That we are all connected, that we have to avoid damaging others and ourselves. Is a way of connecting your body to something beyond the tangible, through this connection, new insights about you and the world appear that can lead to internal healing or illuminations/awakenings."

Another participant shared:

"It made me realize the depth to which these substances could take you. I always thought of psychedelics as a spiritual thing, in the sense that they open you up and make you more sensitive etc., but ayahuasca seemed to tune you into . . . I started to wonder about there being an intelligence in these substances. I started to feel like there were spirits involved, there were intelligences, the plants themselves had consciousness; it's the impression that is conveyed, and I still feel that way."

These transformative experiences were quoted as sources of knowledge about the self. Most people would express the belief that knowledge acquired in ceremonies comes directly from plants and spirits or from one's own subconscious with the help of plant spirits. Many people, having had more exposure to Eastern religions such as Buddhism, are looking for human spiritual guides and teachers as well, and they expect shamans to fulfill the role of a guru. When they see that in reality they are humans with their weaknesses including promiscuity, alcoholism, or the practice of sorcery, they, as one

consultant put it, "renounce human teachers." Many consultants in fact say that they only trust the plants to teach them, since human teachers tend to abuse power. This misunderstanding comes from a limited knowledge of Amazonian shamanism, which was always involved in the political life of the group and involved conflict between shamans as well as sorcery.

However, what's important here is the emphasis on the value of the self as a source of knowledge and insight—the self becomes the expert. One consultant said that for a long time he was lost and he did not know that the solution was inside him. He spent years looking for something, for example by traveling without being able to get what he needed. Ayahuasca helped him see that what he was looking for was already inside him. This was a common theme across shamans—the value of knowledge already existing in a person. One shaman said that many people go from shaman to shaman looking for "who knows what," when everything they are looking for is inside them.

It has to be noted that, even though there is some anecdotal evidence of radical transformation in just one ceremony, most consultants stressed the fact that this transformation of the self does not happen overnight but is a rather long and arduous process. Everyone I interviewed was aware of its difficulties and they described it as "work." This is why people will return to Peru as often as possible in order to resume where they left off.

CONCLUSION

I have shown in this chapter the ways in which ayahuasca rituals are conceptualized as a liminal, transformative experience that contributes to the transformation of the self by providing the space for experiencing *communitas* and self-reflection. This is not a ritual that reproduces social order; rather the ingestion of a powerful entheogen provides the ideal instrument of critique of mainstream culture by challenging basic cultural assumptions about oneself and the world. Based on this evidence, I argue that it makes sense to frame shamanic tourism as a sort of pilgrimage. These two phenomena share the focus on healing and personal transformation, which I have shown to be central for contemporary ayahuasca partakers. In this context, ayahuasca rituals are viewed by Westerners as the healing force for bodily and mental disorders that stem from what is perceived as Western culture's spiritual impoverishment. In contrast to recreational use of similar substances, in shamanic tourism liminality is central and becomes the springboard for both healing and personal transformation. For Western participants, this healing is part of a larger project for healing and transforming humanity as one of the most important reported outcomes of their personal transformation is the realization of interconnectedness of all beings—in the words of one of my consultants, "we are all one—one heart."

NOTES

1. The common type of building in the jungle made of wood, on stilts, and with a roof made of palm leaves.
2. Ayahuasquero is a healer specializing in leading ceremonies with ayahuasca.
3. Another name for ayahuasca (commonly used in Colombia).
4. *Sclerolobium setiferum*, usually burned in ceremony much like incense.
5. This is unusual; in fact, this was the only shaman I witnessed that encouraged this at the end of the ceremony.
6. Overview of an ayahuasca ceremony: <http://www.bluemorphotours.com/overview-of-an-ayahuasca-ceremony.html>
7. Amazonian Shamanism: <http://www.bluemorphotours.com/amazonian-shamanism.html>

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