



UNIVERSITY OF AMSTERDAM

# Changa's Alchemy

Narratives of Transformation in Psychedelic Experiences



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<sup>1</sup> Martina Hoffmann – *Alien Ascension*

“ One of the most famous of all alchemical axioms is, “as above, so below”, meaning always, that in every small part of reality, there is a tiny reflection of the great over structure of reality. In the largest structures are hidden the secrets of the smallest, and vice versa. The psychedelics have brought us back to this alchemical mystery.”

Terence McKenna (1946-2000)

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Alchemical Transmutations

My child,  
you are receiving the primal matter,  
understand the blindness  
and the dejection of your first condition.  
Then you did not know yourself,  
everything was darkness within you and without.  
Now that you have taken a few steps  
in the knowledge of yourself,  
learn that the Great God  
created before man this primal matter  
and that he then created man  
to possess it and be immortal.  
Man abused it and lost it, but it still exists  
in the hands of the Elect of God  
and from a single grain of this precious matter  
becomes a projection into infinity.

*Count Cagliostro*<sup>2</sup>

Within popular culture alchemy is known as the mysterious science by which a man can transform base metals into gold. Alchemists were renowned for their ability to alter the very nature of things; further, legend claimed that through the use of a mysterious substance known as the *philosopher's stone*, an alchemist could transmute matter or achieve immortality. The legend of the philosopher's stone has inspired writers and researchers for hundreds of years, but the mystery of the magical "primal matter" remains unsolved. Carl Gustav Jung interpreted the philosopher's stone as the process of seeking inner

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<sup>2</sup> In Faulks and Cooper, 2008.

transformation, being the final achievement of alchemical opus the evolution of the alchemist's soul (Robertson, 2009). Parallels between the idea of a mythical alchemical transmutation, with its inescapable spiritual subtext, and the profound transformation of human consciousness that can be catalysed through the use of psychedelic<sup>3</sup> substances are intriguing. Experiences induced by those substances have undeniable transformative features and possibly therapeutic uses, as cognitive scientists and psychiatrists are widely demonstrating. It is now ascertain that entheogens<sup>4</sup> are capable to "speed up the evolution of our individual and collective consciousness, through thinning the veil that separates conscious and unconscious mind, allowing these to unite" (Papasprou, 2015, p. 78).

Albert Hoffman's synthesis of lysergic acid diethylamide's (LSD)<sup>5</sup> in 1943, Aldous Huxley's book *The Doors of Perception* (1954), the work of psychedelic pioneers Timothy Leary and Terence McKenna, and the appearance of the sixties hippy counterculture marked the beginning of a new chapter in contemporary Western cultural history, a chapter defined by a massive search for spiritual means and mystical experiences independent of organised religions - as well as recreational adventures in outer space - through the use of entheogenic substances (Partridge, 2005) .

Although its psychoactive properties were discovered by the Hungarian psychiatrist Szára in 1956, N,N-dimethyltryptamine (DMT), a naturally occurring molecule present in approximately 150 plants worldwide, was popularized by the kaleidoscopic lecturer and psychedelic adventurer Terence McKenna in the 1990s. DMT is thus a recent discovery within popular psychedelic culture, and has proven itself a compelling substance both for researchers and consumers. The effects of DMT are often described as being extremely

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<sup>3</sup> The word 'psychedelic' was coined by psychiatrist Humphrey Osmond in 1956. It is composed of the Greek words *psyche*, which means 'spirit', 'soul' or 'mind' and *delein*, meaning 'to manifest' or 'to open'. Osmond used the term to refer to a certain class of psychoactive drugs, including *psilocybin*, LSD, mescaline, *iboga*, *Salvia Divinorum*, *Peyote*, and DMT.

<sup>4</sup> To avoid the negative shades that the word psychedelic was projecting in mainstream's people minds, in 1979 a group of ethnobotanists, including Carl Ruck, Gordon Wasson and Jonathan Ott, introduced the term *entheogen*, a word composed by Greek words *theos*, 'God', and *genesthai*, 'to come into being', meaning 'realizing the divine within'. The ethnobotanists group decided to popularize the term *entheogenic* finding inappropriate the term *hallucinogenic*, reminiscent of delirium and insanity, or *psychedelic* that other than being associated with the discussed 60s pops culture, reminded also of psychosis. They refer to the same class of drugs mentioned previously as psychedelics, 'In a strict sense, only those vision-producing drugs that can be shown to have figured in shamanic or religious rites would be designated entheogens, but in a looser sense, the term could also be applied to other drugs, both natural and artificial, that induce alterations of consciousness similar to those documented for ritual ingestion of traditional entheogens.' (Ruck et al. , 1979)

<sup>5</sup> LSD is a synthetic chemical derived from alkaloids that are produced by the ergot fungus that grows on rye.

intense, with users being privy to visions so authentic they alter the user's understanding of the world and the self. It is because of the transformative role that DMT can play in a user's consciousness that the molecule has been speculatively compared with the mythical philosopher's stone (McKenna, 2012; St John 2015).

The number of DMT users across the globe has grown rapidly in the past ten years (Sledge and Grim, 2013), and a DMT concoction named *changa* has become particularly popular within the worldwide psychedelic milieu. Often referred to as 'smokeable ayahuasca', changa contains an extract of DMT and *Banisteriopsis Caapi* vine (also known as the 'ayahuasca vine'). Changa is an entheogenic substance and, foremost, a cultural phenomenon. Its history throughout the psychedelic contemporary milieu will be explored in this research. Subsequently, I will focus on the transformative effects of experiences with changa, as witnessed during my fieldwork and expressed by my interviewees.

## **1.2 Aims & Research Questions**

After approximately three years of intermittent participant observation in cultural scenes where changa is used, although often still as an experimental concoction, I have concluded that changa is a rising cultural phenomenon with clear transformative potentials. Changa enables experiences that are far from ordinary consciousness, and although the effects usually last no longer than fifteen minutes the experience is often reported as extremely transformative, and can irrevocably alter the life of the user. Although difficult to articulate, these experiences recurrently provoke deep personal reflection and a reevaluation of the user's epistemological paradigm.

Using the methods of qualitative analysis, this research attempts to answer what I found to be the most compelling question concerning the smoking mixture changa, and its observed and reported transformative impact on users:

*How does a changa experience transform the user's consciousness?*

In order to give an exhaustive answer, I have divided my research question into a sequence of three sub-questions, addressing the three central issues that my work examines.

Changa and its related cultural phenomena remain rarely considered, both within academia and between consumers. Therefore addressing the history and explaining the object of this study, my first sub-question is:

*what is changa?*

I will explore the history of the mixture, and the culture that has risen around it. In order to make sense of the plentiful, though at times contradictory and unreliable, information spread across the internet, I made contact with three pivotal figures in the international entheogenic community: Julian Palmer, the self-defined creator of the brew; David Nickles, an independent researcher and editor of the website *DMTnexus*; and Professor8, an anonymous therapist and writer who has been experimenting with the brew for many years. My second sub-question focuses on the changa experience as interpreted by users:

*how do respondents understand and describe their experiences with changa?*

In order to answer this question, I have attempted to engage with my respondents in a cooperative way, helping to translate their complex experiences into meaningful narratives. Analysing these experiences in a systematic way, I have divided the accounts into a description of the experience set and setting, narratives of the content of the changa vision, and a final reflection upon the experience.

Finally, approaching the central issue of this topic, I ask:

*in what ways does a changa experience affect its users' lives?*

As we will see, epistemological changes catalysed through the use of psychedelics often result in deep personal transformations. Exploring how my interviewees perceived the changa experience to have transformed them on personal, social and spiritual levels, I will attempt to categorize changa's transformative qualities, focusing in particular on how users describe the long-term transformations of consciousness induced by its consumption.

The aim of this research is not to discover the cognitive patterns of changa's impact on human consciousness, nor to report any quantitative data on its use. Instead it is an interpretive, qualitative narration of an almost entirely unexplored cultural phenomenon, one that begs deeper analysis in psychological and cognitive research, for changa's potential for psychological healing is clear and manifest, although paradoxically exclusive and inexplicable.

I would like to clarify that changa is not simply a colloquial name for DMT. Changa is a smokeable combination of DMT and *Banisteriopsis Caapi*, the latter being one of the two fundamental ingredients of ayahuasca brews, to which many healing properties are attributed. However, this is not to say that the role of DMT as a visionary compound in the changa concoctions should be underestimated. Described as a potential 'X-factor in the evolution of consciousness' (St John, 2015, p. 384), its prophet and popularizer Terence McKenna argues that DMT is not just a secret, but it is 'the secret' (McKenna, 1993). I believe a brief introduction to this exceptional compound is necessary before continuing.

### 1.3 Is DMT 'the Secret'?

As counterintuitive as it may appear, DMT, a substance that occurs naturally in a variety of plants and animals, was declared illegal by the US Controlled Substance Act of 1970. Between 1990 and 1995 Rick Strassman conducted a unique experiment at the Hospital Clinical Research Center of Albuquerque, supported by the University of New Mexico. Sixty volunteers were injected with DMT, and the physical and visionary experiences of the participants were subject to detailed clinical analysis. The results of the experiment were recorded in the book *DMT: The Spirit Molecule* (2001). Following this research, Strassman suggested that DMT might actually be produced naturally by our pineal gland, subscribing to the hypothesis that the pineal gland is the intermediary between the physical reality and the spiritual realms<sup>6</sup> (2001, p.60). Strassman argued further that 'dreaming, near-death states, the effects of prayer, fasting, and drumming occasion DMT-like states, therefore it is worth assessing DMT activity in such states' (Strassman, 2014b, p. 30). This assumption draws on esoteric ideas of the pineal gland as being the origin of spiritual and paranormal abilities, such as clairvoyance or communications with other dimensions. Madame Blavatsky, occultist and co-founder of the Theosophical Society, identified the pineal gland with the *dead third eye*<sup>7</sup> (1888, p. 289).

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<sup>6</sup> Providing persuasive evidence forwardly confirming Strassman's theories, in 2013 Steven Barker published a paper in which he reports that, during the experiments with his colleague Jimo Borjigin, he unequivocally identified DMT as being present in pineal gland of living rats.

<sup>7</sup> 'The third eye is dead, and acts no longer; but it has left behind a witness to its existence. This witness is now the pineal gland' (Blavatsky, 1888, p.295).



Terence McKenna, the poetic prophet of the psychedelic community, regarded DMT as the most powerful and authentic psychedelic experience one could have, concluding that “this isn’t a drug, this is *magic!*” (McKenna, 1991). During his many lectures around the world, he repeatedly recounted in detail his experiences after smoking DMT, and is credited with popularizing the substance in the Westernentheogenic milieu<sup>8</sup>. The consumption of relatively pure DMT, and similar alkaloids such as 5–MeO–DMT and NMT, extracted and purified from plant material or synthesized chemically, is an exclusively modern (and largely Western) practice.

Since Strassman’s experiments in the 1990s, a small (but growing) number of academic and underground researchers have focused on DMT and its potential. The neurobiologist and neuropsychologist, Andrew Gallimore (2013), argues that ‘the DMT molecule, together with the effects it produces in humans, have profound implications for our understanding of consciousness and the nature of reality itself’ (p. 457). Gallimore proposes the theory that DMT might be an ancestral neuromodulator that was secreted by the brain in psychedelic concentrations during sleep, allowing access to neurological structures different and separate from those generating our reality. Although this function has now been lost, smoking or injecting DMT reactivates these structures, allowing access not to an alien world, but to a world from which we have been alienated. The brain’s thalamocortical system learned to construct consensus reality through evolution, childhood development and personal experience; it seems likely that it must have also learned to construct alien worlds when DMT flooded the brain. If this were true, it would mean that this simple tryptamine has a long-standing relationship with the brain, a conclusion supported by a number of pharmacological peculiarities unique to DMT (Gallimore, 2013, pp. 455-503).

Proving itself to be categorically different from other psychedelics, such as psilocybin or LSD, within seconds of consuming DMT the user is transported to what Rick Strassman, Eduardo Luna, Ede Frecska and other scientists would define as *another completely autonomous reality, inhabited with an enormous variety of entities that communicate, often telepathically, with the user* (Strassman et al., 2008). David Luke forwarded the hypothesis

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<sup>8</sup> When addressing to Westernentheogenic milieu or community, I refer to the virtual psychonautic community as introduce in section 2.1, see Davis (2000) for more about it.

that DMT provides access to a Jungian collective unconscious populated by archetypal beings (Luke, 2011). However, the DMT experience appears to be more complex than this. Individuals who undertake a DMT experience afterwards feel themselves unable to deny the reality of what they have seen. Users are convinced of the authenticity of their visions, a feeling confirmed by the self-determination of the beings encountered, who are often described as having a distinct, subjective will and intention. Jungian theory is thus inadequate to explain the phenomena, for it cannot bring researchers 'any closer to knowing whether or not [these entities] can be considered *real*' (Gallimore & Luke, 2015, p. 307).

A more philosophical theory is encoded in Strassman's final book, *DMT and The Soul of Prophecy* (2014), in which he attempts to provide a spiritual model for the DMT experiences that were described in his previous book *DMT: The Spirit Molecule* and his research notes. Strassman proposes a model he calls 'theoneurology', which links biology and spirituality, affirming that 'the brain is the agent through which God communicates with humans' (Strassman, 2014, p.4), as opposed to the clinically accepted model of 'neurotheology', which claims that spiritual experiences are deliberately generated by the brain. This theory represents a shift in Strassman's approach from a clinical biological perspective to a quasi-theological one, as he began to explore religious models as a way to explain DMT's effects. Having dismissed Buddhism, which posits the unreality of the visions one sees during meditation, and Latin American shamanism, which he believed focused too much on the agency of individual spirits - rather than the source of these spirits. Strassman found his answer in the Hebrew Bible, arguing that 'any model that is going to get any traction in the West has a greater chance of success if it can integrate and utilize the predominant theological Western mindset' (Strassman, 2014b, p. 32).

During prophetic experiences as described by the Hebrew Bible, the subject sees visions, hears voices, experiences extreme emotions, flies through space and attains new insights, all within the context of interacting with an external objective parallel reality which is as real, if not more so, than everyday reality. The prophetic message is extraordinarily well articulated and consistent, describing the nature and activities of God and providing insight into some of the most essential human concerns (Strassman, 2014). Strassman places examples of prophetic experiences from the Hebrew Bible alongside remarkably similar reports from

Strassman's experimental subjects under the influence of DMT. No doubt DMT's prophet par excellence, Terence McKenna, would be intrigued by Strassman's theory, for it affirms the inescapable connection between religious feelings and the use of psychedelics. In McKenna's view these feelings are driven by the wish to make contact with a 'transhuman, hyperdimensional and ultimately alien universe' (McKenna, 1991), seemingly the world that DMT gives access to.

## **2. Ethnographic Narratives**

### **2.1 An Ethnography**

Ethnographic studies are qualitative analyses of specific groups of people such as institutions, populations, nations, tribes or any other form of human beings sharing culture. What an ethnographic text tries to explain are the patterns of values, beliefs, behaviors and languages shared by any group of people. The researcher collects the information needed for such an analysis by participating actively in the group and directly observing the subject of the investigation (Geertz, 1973; Clifford and Marcus, 1986; Gubrium and Hollstein, 1997; Hemmersley and Atkinson, 2007).

The qualitative data presented in these pages are the result of my participant observation of a recent trend in the worldwide, although principally Western, psychedelic milieu – smoking changa. There is not a specific geographical location connected to this transnational phenomenon; users worldwide share their knowledge predominantly through virtual platforms, and meet during events such as psychedelic festivals and conferences (Tramacchi, 2006). In the modern world technology allows both mainstream and underground cultures to spread rapidly, irrespective of geographical boundaries. Underground cultural groups no longer need physical headquarters, as their mobility is essential for their continuing existence. This is particularly true for cultural phenomena that fall within the broad category of psychedelic culture, which is characterized by illicit practices, social marginalization and isolation. When dealing with the consumption of substances that are classified by the majority of the world's governments as illegal, it is problematic to engage in conspicuous groups and meetings.

Smoking changa is popular within a number of underground scenes and groups that, for obvious reasons, must therefore remain as anonymous as possible. I have chosen changa users to interview quite randomly from different parts of the globe, and by preserving their anonymity they are able to speak openly about their experiences. To this end the names of respondents used in these pages are pseudonymous and no specific details are given as for their specific origin, location and so forth. Coming from a range of social and geographical

backgrounds, changa users can be united by the label 'psychonaut'<sup>9</sup>, a word of recent coinage meaning a 'navigator of the mind and soul'. It is used to describe individuals who use consciousness-altering substances as a means to explore their inner and outer worlds. Psychonauts connect primarily through the Internet, where they share knowledge on entheogenic plants, methods for altering consciousness - and report back from the 'trips' they have taken (Davis, 2000).

## 2.2 Fieldwork & Interviews

My fieldwork consisted of participant observation attending psychedelic conferences and festivals, and accessing local communities through informal networks. This allowed me to make many connections with psychonauts from all over the globe. I conducted about twenty in depth interviews with people acquainted with the use of psychedelics, whose ages ranging between eighteen to seventy years old. I attempted to create a diverse case selection by choosing people from different cultural backgrounds with a range of occupations, including students, journalists, musicians, therapists, farmers, labourers and educators. It is complex to determine the exact duration of my fieldwork, as my observations began three years ago, while I narrowed my research topic only one year ago. During these interviews I asked participants how they understood changa as a cultural phenomenon, what the content of their changa visions were, and how their experiences with changa had influenced their lives, both on a personal and social level. In the *Appendix I* provide an example of my interviews' themes and questions.

The method I use for data analysis is a very common form used in qualitative research, thematic analysis. Thematic analysis emphasizes organization and rich description of the

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<sup>9</sup> The term psychonaut was firstly used by German author Ernst Jünger in describing Arthur Heffter in his 1970 essay on his own extensive psychedelic experiences *Annäherungen: Drogen und Rausch* (literally: "Approaches: Drugs and Inebriation"). In this essay, Jünger parallels drug experience and physical exploration. Peter J. Carroll made *Psychonaut* the title of a 1982 book on the experimental use of meditation, ritual and drugs in the experimental exploration of consciousness and of psychic phenomena, or "chaos magick". The term's first published use in a scholarly context is attributed to ethnobotanist Jonathan Ott, in 2001.

data, the coding of themes and interpretation of these codes, and is a convenient method to capture the complexity of meanings within a data set (Guest et al., 2012).

Given the vast range in the geographical locations of my respondents, I primarily used the Internet as a platform upon which to communicate. Many interviews were conducted on Skype and some in written form. This was due to the fact that, at times my respondents had difficulty articulating their personal experiences while speaking with me, and were better able to put their experiences in written words. Therefore, I decided to let the interviewees decide whether they would prefer to speak to me directly, or to write their accounts. To my surprise the majority preferred the written interview form. In both modes, I used the same semi-structured interview scheme, and, when needed, sent follow-up questions, requesting more detail about certain aspects of their narration.

In addition to these interviews I have participated in some changa smoking sessions, experimenting with interviewing immediately after the changa experience, in an effort to best capture subjects' primary reactions. Although this method resulted in vague and unclear narrations, as it appears that time is needed to interpret and verbalize the content and meaning of each changa experiences, I had the opportunity to observe subjects' immediate reactions to the experience, the duration and intensity of the effects, and what form the physical experience took.

I myself also consumed changa on several occasions, both in order to better understand my respondents' experiences with the concoction and their narrative-making process, and to satisfy my personal curiosity. These experiences, which happened outside the context of this research, helped me to develop a flexibility that would allow me to understand different ways of reality making, and "learn to take the new alternate frame of reality quite seriously" (Droogers, 1996, p. 291). I maintain that when dealing with entheogenic alterations of consciousness, firsthand experience of these often-indescribable realms is invaluable. Although such participation may cause profound 'interpretative drift'<sup>10</sup>, it is clear that "(t)he anthropologist cannot have access to the inner reaches of those to whom one talks; one can

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<sup>10</sup> Tania Luhrmann uses this phrase to describe her time undertaking fieldwork in a Wicca coven in England. Involving herself more and more in the practices and beliefs of the group, Luhrmann recorded her own process of interpretive drift, 'the slow, often unacknowledged shift in someone's manner of interpreting events as they become more and more involved in a particular activity' (1989, p. 312).

have partial access to one's own, and *through involvement* at least begin to understand what some of the others may have been experiencing" (Luhmann, 1989, p. 15).

### **2.3 Narrative Approach**

When approaching highly subjective experiences, such as those catalyzed by psychedelics, a researcher is faced with a realm of almost unlimited complexity. As an anthropologist facing the issue of methodology, I searched for 'a way of recounting and creating order out of experience' (Moen, 2006, p. 2). Storytelling methodology proved itself the most productive way to apply my research questions to the accounts I had gathered. Exploring psychedelic subjective experience, one is often faced with the instability of what is regarded as 'reality'. As Moen states:

There is no single, dominant, or static reality but, rather, a number of realities that are constructed in the process of interactions and dialogues. Human knowledge of the world is thus relative. It is dependent on the individual's past and present experiences, her or his values, the people the stories are being told to (the addressees), and when and where they are being told. (2006, p. 5)

While collecting my interviews the truth of this passage impressed itself upon me again and again, as many of my interviewees struggled to translate their psychedelic experiences into words. A narrative can help to articulate what is only one small part of an infinitely complex reality (or range of realities). The narrative approach reflects the idea that humans make sense of their lives by ordering their experiences, and the meanings they attribute to these experiences, in narrative patterns.

Cook and Crang's argue that "ethnographers cannot take a naïve stance that what they are told is the absolute 'truth' ... rather, they/we are involved in the struggle to produce intersubjective truths, to understand why so many versions of events are produced and recited" (1995, p. 11). When speaking about DMT and its effects, neither scientists nor ethnographers have accomplished such an intersubjective approach to truth, and "the

researcher is put into a position of having to speculate about the phenomena being studied” (Maines, 1993, p. 128). However, there are ways to overcome such speculations:

A narrative sociology would minimize such speculation by respecting the complexity of human relations and group life. That respect would begin with the recognition of multiple realities that are rendered meaningful in personal and collective narratives. [...] The virtue of this approach is that the researcher has access to the contradictions and thereby is on firmer empirical grounds than without them, but it increases difficulties in drawing conclusions across cases. (Maines, 1993, p. 129).

It is inherently problematic to make any truth claims when speaking about subjective entheogenic experiences. The best a researcher can do is to allow the structure of how subjects narrate their experiences to structure his or her work. Bruner argues that narratives actually organize experiences and memories (1991), and I found this to be particularly true with the subjects of entheogenic experiences I encountered during my fieldwork, who needed to engage privately in an interpretive process before they were able to narrate their experience to a third party.

Narration of a subjective experience reflects both the experience itself and the wider cultural context within which it occurred. Having noted above that the key factor uniting my respondents is their participation in the psychonaut community, we must question to what extent narratives about the changa experience can tell us about the larger psychonaut community. Subjective narratives provide extremely rich material for the study of cultural identity and practice; as I explore within my analysis, “[s]tories operate within 'interpretive communities' of speakers and hearers that are political as well as cultural actors. They build collective identities than can lead, albeit slowly and discontinuously, to cultural shifts and political change” (Squire, 2008, p. 55).

Both experience and narrative are always enclosed in a cultural framework. Respondents and researchers use ideas and formulations that belong to this context and that enrich and evolve it from inside to the outside, and vice versa. Changa users are engaged in a dialectical relationship with the psychedelic cultural tradition, being the influenced and the influencer, proving that ‘each individual constructs his or her own world, but does so out of the building



blocks presented by others' (Spickard, 1991, p. 2). Narrativity is crucial to the development of psychedelic culture; new narratives are constantly adding to and evolving the psychedelic milieu, mapping the space between DMT's hyperdimensional extra-reality, and reality as normally conceived.

## **2.4 An Experience**

The concept of *experience* is fundamental in my analysis; therefore it is interesting to question what 'experiencing' means here. In general, such a term is used to identify the mix of actions, emotions, perceptions and bodily sensations that human beings interpret and feel as individual and subjective processes (Bruner, 1986; Gadamer, 1991). It is almost impossible to have an experience identical to another, and thus each experience is unique. The process of experiencing shifts is unpredictable and dynamic, causing scholars to make a distinction between an experience per se and the process of experiencing (Dilthey, 1976; Bruner, 1986). *An experience* is 'the intersubjective articulation of experience', while *experiencing* refers to 'the ongoing temporal flow of reality, as it is received by consciousness' (Bruner, 1986, p. 6). Experiencing is incommunicable, a strictly individual process, while an experience can be told. Experiencing contains a far vaster array of feelings, insights and intuitions that cannot be translated into words, 'because we lack the performative and narrative resources, or because the vocabulary is lacking' (White and Epston, 1990, p. 13).

A critical issue that arose during my interviews was my interviewees' concern that they were unable to articulate an authentic account of their complex, fluctuating experiences. Indeed, according to Yamane, the stream of 'experiencing' cannot be empirically studied, being private and inaccessible to methods of social scientific research (2000, p. 174). I tend to agree with this statement, having experienced difficulties when attempting to articulate my own personal experiences with *changa*. It is for this reason that I believe firsthand

experience is invaluable to a researcher of entheogenic phenomena, allowing him or her an etic<sup>11</sup> view of the object of study.

Within this research, I have focused on how the experience of smoking changa is narrated by my interviewees. Charting how the collaborative effort of researcher and respondents to accomplish a reduction of the complexity and multi layered quality of 'an experience' into narrative form, render it an interpreted and sharable experience.

## 2.5 Consciousness

This research will explore how transformed worldviews develop from personal transformations of consciousness; therefore, the concept of consciousness is pivotal to my work. Since Descartes' '*cogito ergo sum*', philosophical argument has shifted from the cosmos to the individual as the origin of all things. John Locke proposed the word *consciousness* to refer to the individual minds' perceptions, which subsequently became seen as the foundation of society, language and knowledge.

Decades ago, anthropologists attempted to investigate the relationship between individual and collective consciousness (Cohen, 1994; Cohen and Rapport, 1995), concluding that social reality is a 'matter of ongoing interpretation by conscious individuals. [...] It is necessary to connect up (however partially) the ideational and sensational world of the experiencing individual with the outer world of publicly exchanged behaviors' (Rapport and Overing, 2000, p. 67). The study of cultural phenomenon should thus focus on understanding the dialectical relationship between different conscious minds that together and individually shape the meaning of the things we experience. As human beings we are *conscious of being conscious*, which is arguably what distinguishes human awareness from animalistic awareness (Rapport and Overing, 2000). Positing that our mind is constantly describing itself (Focillon in Edelman, 1992, p. 124), conscious experiences have inherently subjective qualities, which transcends any attempt at objectivity (Cornwell, 1994).

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<sup>11</sup> 'The etic (scientist-oriented) approach shifts the focus from local observations, categories, explanations, and interpretations to those of the anthropologist. The etic approach realizes that members of a culture often are too involved in what they are doing to interpret their cultures impartially. When using the etic approach, the ethnographer emphasizes what he or she considers important.' (Conrad, 2006, p. 47)

The hard sciences still tell us far less about the aspects of the 'soul' (the self, personality, individual identity) that really matter—about the details of the subjective nature of consciousness, and about 'the stupendously complex dialectical interplay of subjectivity, self and society'—than those first-hand observations of the 'moral narratives' by which meaningful lives are lived. (Porter, 1994, p. 7)

Consciousness, as will be evident in this work, is not a substance but a process, continuous and yet in a permanent state of flux (James, 1890). The process of consciousness involves an endless interpretive effort of writing and rewriting, as identity is developed through the process of creating narrative. Each individual composes his or her life story, and while 'telling' it to themselves and others individual consciousness emerges. Simultaneously these narratives engage with and are influenced by the dialectical process of collective meaning and shared value, as Geertz posited. Geertz's interpretive anthropology confirms, in fact, that the imposition of meaning upon consciousness is the primary condition of human existence, and that 'becoming human was becoming individual' (1973, p. 52). According to his work, consciousness expresses itself only within cultural or social groups; meaning depends on an exchange of common symbols and shared knowledge (1973).

Another key attribute of consciousness is its temporality. It is by remembering the past and imagining the future that the present is created and as the decisive moment (Rapport and Overing, 2000, p. 77). The process of remembering is itself interpretive; when one narrativizes the story of their ongoing consciousness, certain elements are emphasised, while others are re-arranged or cut out entirely. Memory and experiential knowledge is thus constituted by one's arrangement of past experiences into one of many possible presents. A recent development in anthropology of consciousness, the concept of cultural self-reprogramming will be crucial to my research. Cultural self-reprogramming represents:

A liberation both from over-determining cultural conditions and overweening social institutions (discourse, collective representation, social relationship, *habitus*, praxis), and from their social-scientific commentator-apologists. This is not because of a desire to change anthropology's object from society to the individual, but because anthropology can no

longer rest content with traditional assumptions that social behaviour originates or resides in forces (social, historical, cultural) beyond and 'outside' the individual. (Rapport and Overing, 2000, p. 79)

This process of influence is dialectical, and I have thus made an effort within my analysis to highlight how alterations of consciousness within an individual can, through a process of epistemological exchange through a virtual community, be capable of inducing larger social and cultural transformations.

### 3. Exploring Changa

This chapter will provide a detailed introduction to changa and a look at the history of the smoking mixture, utilising in particular my interviews with Julian Palmer, who claims to have invented the substance, David Nickles and Professor8. I will begin by explaining exactly what changa is, exploring how users define the substance, its general effects and the ways it can be smoked. The second section is an ethno-botanical introduction to the plants from which it is made, noting the ‘official’ recipe, some possible alternative mixtures, and the issues surrounding the sustainability of a do-it-yourself (DIY) approach to the concoction. In the third section I will explore changa’s cultural history, charting its development from the Australian context in which it was born and investigating Palmer’s role in its invention before exploring how it became so popular within the wider psychedelic milieu. The fourth section examines the differences between changa and pure DMT, using data taken from interviews with people who had had experience with both substances. The final section takes the form of a short overview on *ayahuasca* analogues to which the concoction changa pertains.

#### 3.1 What is Changa?

Often called ‘smokable ayahuasca’, changa is *a smoking mixture consisting of a synergistic blend of herbs, those that contain DMT and MAO-inhibitors as active ingredients*. Changa is unique in its combination of DMT with extracts or vine or leaves from the *Banisteriopsis Caapi* that acts as a ‘monoamine oxidase inhibitor’<sup>12</sup> (MAOi). The writer, psychonaut, and self-defined alchemist Julian Palmer gave the name ‘changa’ to the mixture in 2003,

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<sup>12</sup> The most common MAO inhibitors used in changa blends are *Banisteriopsis Caapi* vine and *Peganum Harmala*, known as *Syrian Rue*, both of which contain harmala alkaloids such as harmine and harmaline. When the Colombian pharmacist Rafael Zerda Bayon isolated the constituent of *yagé*, the Tucanoan name for ayahuasca, he gave it the name *telepatina*. Telepathine was originally thought to be the active chemical constituent of *Banisteriopsis Caapi*. This name was given after observing the effects of the brew on indigenous users, such as the ability to see future events, to encounter ancestral spirits and to have telepathic communication among tribal members. Nowadays telepathine is known as harmine or MAO inhibiting beta-carboline (Callaway et al. 2005).

although the substance began to gain a wider popularity ten years later. When asked about the birth-date of changa, Palmer stated:

It would be around April 2004, but it came gradually from June 2003 from early prototypes with goo and mullein and mint, December 2003 with 50% DMT and 50% ayahuasca vine. In April was when we got the goo, and spread the resulting herbs to all and sunders for free. I think the name in May/June 2004, but I can't be sure. We used to call it 'smoke mix' or smoking mix for some time. I met one guy in the desert still using this term in 2011! (J. Palmer, Personal Communication, June, 2015)

Although changa is not as famous as other psychedelic concoctions, its popularity is growing fast. During my research, I encountered many consumers who had still a very unclear idea of what changa actually is, many of them even believing that it is a plant that grows on its own. The changa smokers I interviewed were partially aware of the nature of changa, however many were totally unaware of the history of the substance. Many called changa a medicine, and all agreed that the substance should not be defined as a 'drug' and should not be illegal, sharing little with other substances in this category, particularly addictive substances such as heroin or cocaine.

Although it is often used as such in particular events or outdoor festivals, changa cannot rightly be described as a recreational or hedonistic drug, for its effects are unpredictable, with experiences ranging from slightly frightening to absolute ecstatic. Its effects are widely depicted as a journey into the mystery of life and divinity, or as a leap in the profoundness of one's psyche. For the majority of my interviewees, changa is a vehicle for inner investigation, often inducing transformation. Unlike LSD and other psychoactive drugs, DMT is not an ego-shattering drug; rather it can be used as an aid for retaining the ego and expanding awareness (J. Palmer, Personal Communication, June, 2015).

The percentages of DMT and MAOi concentration in changa blends determine the intensity and type of experience that will occur and can create largely varying experiences. Palmer suggests that a 20%-30% DMT changa blend is the perfect dosage for people wishing to access DMT comfortably and in a beneficial way, though acquainted users would expect at least a 50% blend with MAOi extractions to enhance and prolong the effects (2015).

Broadly speaking the effects of changa last longer than those of DMT crystals, depending on the MAOI percentage—it can last for up to 40 minutes, although the average duration is between 10 and 15 minutes, with 20/25 minutes of ‘afterglow’. DMT is described as an unpredictable substance, though there is common understanding that when smoked it is strongly visual, with a rapid ‘coming-up’, a pleasant afterglow, and relaxing and calming physical effects. Users confirm that the presence of MAOI makes the ‘coming-up’ gentler and the whole experience more grounded.

The content of the visualizations are extremely diverse, as will be narrated in the next chapter. Experiences with changa can be divided into a number of levels, varying from light to very deep. This is dependent on several factors, though the chief factor is the amount of DMT consumed in combination with the MAOI concentration. After years of personal and group experiences, Julian Palmer divides the levels of changa experience as follows:

- (1) The user experiences a different state of consciousness where reality looks like a high definition picture - clearer and crisper. The general perception of inner and outer reality seems a bit different, without any strong visual effect.
- (2) The second level consists of closed eyes visuals patterns, particularly geometrical patterns, fractals of the type seen in psychedelic art illustrations.
- (3) Visions start to become more creative. Users may see other dimensional objects, beings, landscapes and very strong deformations of normal reality.
- (4) The user experiences communication with these other dimensional beings or interactions with other forms of reality.
- (5) Any incredible thing can happen, none of the normal rules of time and space apply, the observed and the observer become one. Communication with entities, which is often telepathic, becomes more meaningful. (Personal Communication, June, 2015)

Unfortunately breakthrough experiences, those experienced in level 4 and 5, are the most difficult to articulate, and related memories might vanish as the user returns to his or her normal state. It usually takes some effort and experience to discover what an individual’s ideal dose is, as there are no proper rules, being the concoctions’ effects very subjective.

Users note a range of different ways to smoke changa, and none can be absolutely identified as the best; each user develops his or her own preference. A very common way is to smoke it in a cigarette or joint, ideally rolled pure without tobacco or marijuana, as other

components can influence the meaning of the whole experience. Some users prefer this method because it is more manageable than a 'one-hit', which often leads to an immediate breakthrough experience. Vaporizing the substance leads to a less direct, gentler effect. Using a glass or wooden pipe results in a direct 'coming up', although the smoke is often very harsh and hot. A water pipe or bong is considered the most straightforward method of consumption, but practice is needed to perform it in the proper manner<sup>13</sup>.

### 3.2 Plant Alchemy

Changa effects can vary deeply, depending on the types of alkaloids present in the plants, the alchemical interaction of the various herbs and other external factors, such as set and setting. I believe some ethnobotanical information concerning the plants involved in the mixture is necessary. *Mimosa Hostilis* or *Tenuiflora*<sup>14</sup>, originally from Central and South America, are the plants most used as a DMT source for changa blends almost worldwide (excluding Australia), due to their easy extraction techniques and high availability. In Australia DMT is primarily extracted from different species of acacia trees, such as *Acacia Obtusifolia*, *Confusa* or *Acuminata*. *Phalaris Brachystachys* or *Arundinacea* are native European grasses containing high percentages of DMT, but are still not widely used as DMT sources. However given the increasing demand of the molecule, *Phalaris'* potentials should not be underestimated<sup>15</sup>.

Palmer argues that 'each source of DMT is entirely different with different qualities and teachings – simply because each plant has a different spirit and a different communication' (205, p. 188). Opinions regarding *Mimosa's* effect vary quite a lot. Many users in Europe

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<sup>13</sup> It has been found that to smoke or ingest DMT containing brews when taking antidepressant medications (especially SSRI) can result in unhealthy consequences. The combination with other drugs is not said to be dangerous, except with high doses of MDMA, in which case the dangerous Serotonin Syndrome can occur (Palmer, 2014). Reports of users smoking changa on LSD are very positive, with users claiming the latter substance enhances the trip strength (Gaia, 2015). Taking DMT alongside Ketamine slows down the experience and allow the user to have more control over the content of their vision (Mary Kay, My Oh My, 2000). Some users also report that consuming a little alcohol before smoking can be beneficial, because of its relaxing effect.

<sup>14</sup> In the Jurema cult (see Samorini 2016) the most used species are *Mimosa Tenuiflora*, *Mimosa Verrucosa* and *Mimosa Ophthalmocentra*, the last one containing the highest amount of DMT, attested at 1,6% of plants' dried weight.

<sup>15</sup> Samorini suggests that some *Phalaris* stocks contain a very toxic alkaloid, that is difficult to isolate with DIY extraction techniques. Therefore he discourages the use of this specie as DMT source (2016).



claim that it is undeniably the best source of DMT - however, this is more likely to be because they have never tried an *Acacia* blend rather than any indication of true preference.

Years ago a friend said that if you smoke changa from any other plant than acacia, it's like kissing your sister. I think that's a bit extreme. I think changa made from *Mimosa* really tastes and works well. I prefer the acacia because it's what I know, what I'm familiar with; it's the base, the reference point. But of course the spirit of the plant is going to be very different. You know, when I smoke *Mimosa* I communicate with the spirit of *Mimosa Hostilis*. When I smoke *Acacia Acuminata* I communicate with the spirit of *Acacia Acuminata*.' (J. Palmer, Personal Communication, June, 2015)

From a scientific perspective, the slightly different effect produced by several DMT-containing plants are due to the active alkaloids that each plant has, many of whom are yet undiscovered. In certain species of *Acacia*, including *Acuminata* and *Confusa*, another alkaloid, called NMT or monomethyl-tryptamine,<sup>16</sup> can be found. In 2001 the Australian researcher Nen did several experiments with NMT and discovered that it has unique entheogenic effects. It has one third of the potency of DMT and a slower onset. The substance appears to be "not so much a visual or auditory entheogen, but rather a spatial hallucinogen... imagine you could feel but not see an Escher world" (Nen888, 2011).

There are no fixed rules as for the use of specific ingredients within the changa mixture. The presence of DMT and MAOi is the only guideline, and thus recipes vary widely. Making changa is a creative process, which individuals often approach after extensive online research or firsthand experimentation. Each creator experiments with different varieties of smokeable herbs to create personalized blends for each particular occasion. This creativity is a response to the Do-It-Yourself (DIY) ethos of the entheogenic virtual community. DMT-Nexus being a reference website, which provides accurate technical information and instructions for extractions and all concerning the 'spirit molecule'. The entry on changa records a huge variety of recipes for changa blends, with names such as 'Ayahuasca Android', 'Electric Sheep', 'Minty Blast', 'Dream Scape', 'The Mekong' or 'Twisted Fruit'.

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<sup>16</sup> Unlike DMT, NMT cannot crystallize; it takes the form of a white or yellow oil darkening with exposure to air (Nen888, 2011).

Palmer's original recipe contained a number of different herbs, each with its own unique feature:

I combined the *Mullein*, the *Peppermint*, ayahuasca vine or leaf, and some *Passionflowers*. It's a MAO inhibitor, it's a relaxing herb, and it's a nice herb. Then I added the *Blue Lotus* to give it some colour and nice vibe. And that was the original recipe and I pretty much stuck with that! (J. Palmer, Personal Communication, June, 2015).

The ratio he suggests, maintaining that 'each herb used in changa has its potency increased by a factor of 10' (Palmer, 2014, p. 185), is 30% ayahuasca vine and/or leaf, 20% Mullein, 20% Passionflower, 20% Peppermint, 5% Calendula and 5% Blue Lotus, "both added after combining the DMT in order to preserve their colour and texture". Palmer argues that "to make a whole bunch of herbs look good is hard work" (Personal Communication, June, 2015).

The changa creators have at their fingertips an endless combination of herbs, spice extractions, and MAOi plants, producing an array of experiential undertones in what has been referred to as the 'changa effect', which will be described at length in chapter 4.

It is common practice for those intending to produce DMT or changa at home to use an online extraction 'TEK'<sup>17</sup>, which are free downloadable handbooks on the extraction of entheogens, with step-by-step instructions, pictures and helpful suggestions. During the course of my research, I received a TEK from Professor8, a middle-aged man working with changa on therapeutic level for about twenty years, with instructions on how to prepare a 'Mindful Caapi Changa' blend. Intriguingly, it suggests a 'sacred' approach to the process. Before beginning the preparation, the author recommends that the creator decides on the intention of further changa use, such as 'I want to expand my universal awareness' or 'I want to commune with God'. They should then focus on this intention through the creation process. The creation should take place in an environment with only positive influences, and should be timed to coincide with the moon cycle. Finally, the author advises "Remember

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<sup>17</sup> An Extraction Tek is a manual providing instructions on how to extract certain chemicals from a given source. 'From *Technique*. Relates to any combination of actions or sufficiently adept single action that results in a favourable outcome for the person performing said Tek' (Urban Dictionary, 2004).

you are an Artist creating something sacred that you will take into your body and communicate with. A creation that will raise your vibration to new heights to explore places few humans ever have the opportunity to go” (Professor8, Private Documents, November, 2015). The preparation instructions continue by suggesting that the creator makes an 11x *Caapi* extraction over the course of 28 days, following the full moon, infuse this in some *Caapi* leaves and finally infuse the ‘spice’, as DMT is often called, at 50%. During this process, the author suggests that the creator speak his or her intentions to the batch, in order to impress this intention upon it, and to thank the plant spirits. A changa blend of the type Professor8 details is strong, and can lead to deep ‘breakthrough’ experiences, recommended for those already attuned with entheogenic contacts - and not suggested for new practitioners. In *The Nexian II*<sup>18</sup> e-zine, Olympus Mon suggests some techniques “to get changa to blow people’s minds” (2014, pp. 48-53). He suggests making 99% IPA infusions of herbs such as for instance *Lavender*, *Lemon Balm* and *Spearmint* before dissolving the spice and the MAOi extractions in this aromatic alcohol. This adds value to the aesthetic appearance of the substance, however it has no extra psychoactive effects.

The circulation of TEKs has opened the way for amateur home-grown ‘alchemists’, making DMT and changa available for anyone willing to spend few hours (and a consistent amount of money) in harvesting and extracting from plant sources; however these experiments often take place without sufficient preparation or serious commitment, creating environmental and ethical problems. Motivated by the consumerist ethos of our times, buyers rarely question the origin or the composition of the goods they buy. Unfortunately this same rule applies to psychedelics, with environmentally conscious purchasers still being a minority. As one might suspect, the most well known DMT-source plants are threatened. The current high demand for these plants is the chief reason for this. On average, plants contain only 1% DMT, and the production of DMT therefore requires an abundance of raw materials, which are often the subject of unethical and unscrupulous greed. Nickles and Nen’s article ‘*When DMT equals killing the Environment*’<sup>19</sup> (2014), denounced the shameful

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<sup>18</sup> This e-zine is available on the website [www.dmt-nexus.me](http://www.dmt-nexus.me) (Accessed May, 2016). No data of publication is provided, but I found evidence that it is been published online in 2014.

<sup>19</sup> In the article Nen, who claims he has been allied with the spirits of the acacias trees since their first encounter with DMT, appeals to the ignorant perpetrators of ecological violence, begging them to be more conscious of their actions and more respectful towards the plants which they harvest. He argues that it is not necessary to remove the bark of the trunk, which

exploitations of ancient and rare acacia trees in Australia. The illegal acacia harvest is uncontrollable, taking place within nature reserves by individuals who adopt violent harvesting techniques, leading to the death of many old, sacred trees.

Discussing how a more sustainable approach to the harvest of DMT might be achieved, David Nickles suggests that “it would be really cool to show up at music festivals and give participants seeds or plants to bring back home and start growing their very own entheogenic garden wherever they are living” (Personal Communication, February 23, 2016). The problems faced by Australian psychonauts are particularly severe, due to the harsh import and export laws that cut the country off from the psychedelic trade; nevertheless, there are serious problems with the commodification and mass production of DMT throughout the world. However this does not need to be the unique scenario. Plants containing DMT can be found growing naturally throughout the world, and many of these can be harvested without damaging the plant itself. Nickles argues that a ‘grow-your-own’ approach is the only answer to the harmful exploitation of natural resources, but if suppliers of psychedelics were to develop an ecologically friendly and self-sustaining mindset this would also go a long way to solving the problem. The illegal status of DMT is another major obstacle to a sustainable approach to harvesting and trading.

If we did not have DMT prohibition, we could have some sort of trade where the roots of trees containing DMT, that are leftovers in the furniture industry for instance, could be sent around to people who want them. This would help to have a minimal environmental and ecological impact. Then why do not turn that industrial waste into DMT? (D. Nickles, Personal Communication, February 23, 2016)

The illegality of the substance, and the strict laws regulating the trade of its source plants, entails many problematic issues. Nickles’ and Nen’s article and propaganda is an example of the socio-political struggles enacted in order to re-shape the internal (and external)

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can cause major damage and even the death of the tree, in order to harvest DMT; he claims that the small twigs or ‘phyllodes’ contain the same percentage of DMT as the trunk, and allow the tree to remain healthy (2014).

regulations of harvesting ethical codes, to a more respectful and less greedy attitude towards nature, which is ultimately the source of all things.

### 3.3 Cultural History

The practice of infusing N,N-Dimethyltryptamine (DMT) into herbs in order to create a smoking mix precedes the creation of changa. Jonathan Ott's 1999 experiments with infusing DMT into parsley and other smokeable herbs resulted in a light mixture containing 10% DMT (Ott, 1996, p. 190). Previous to this, Terence McKenna had visited Byron Bay, Australia in 1997, in order to lecture to the psychedelic community based there. During this lecture McKenna encouraged the locals to recognise the 'golden wattle', Australia's national floral emblem, as a representation of the *Acacia* tree, and a key source of DMT. However this came as little surprise to many who attended this lecture, for Australia's psychedelic characters were already well aware of the national plant's secrets (St John, 2015b). In 1990 an anonymous chemist at the University of Sydney had extracted DMT from locally sourced *Acacia Maidenii*, and in 1993 Nen had identified *Acacia Obtusifolia* as another potential source of the molecule, calling it a 'profound and rare gift from the bush' (in St John, 2015b). These discoveries gave Australian psychonauts familiarity with DMT, which is one of the most easily available psychedelic compounds in the country - particularly because of the ferocious guarding of the Australian borders against international importations. It was partly through this awareness of the psychedelic potential of the *Acacia* tree that a vibrantentheogenic and ethnobotanical community emerged within Australia, converging at conferences and symposiums organized by the *Entheogenesis Australis* (EGA).

Hidden in the pages of the 2011/2012 edition of the EGA's journal, Julian Palmer makes his first official public appearance on the 'changa scene', presenting himself as the inventor of changa.<sup>20</sup> Palmer had already introduced the history of the blend in an anonymous form on a *DMTnexus* thread in 2010, under the pseudonym *chocobeastie*<sup>21</sup>.

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<sup>20</sup> "We called it "smoking mix" sometimes, and "dream time" at others, but "dream time" was more a formal, official name. So I thought we needed a colloquial name for the mixture, a sort of underground name that anyone could use. So I facilitated an *ayahuasca* group and the intention was "Let it be a name, let the name happen." I was sitting on a log and the word came through Changa, I dunno if I like that name, but there wasn't another name that came through so it stuck' (J. Palmer, Personal Communication, June, 2015).

In the 1970 Russian animated short movie *Katerok* (1970), the characters end up on an imaginary desert island named Chunga-Changa. It is a place where everything is possible, a happy place where animals and men sing and enjoy the sun. Beyond this funny homonymy, changa openly refers to the magic mixture, and no one other than Palmer has officially claimed the coinage of the name. In Australia, the concoction may also be colloquially called *aussiewaska* (St John, 2015b, p. 157), a term which refers specifically to brews and smoking blends where DMT is extracted from local acacias, with harmalas sourced mainly from *Caapi*. On *DMTnexus* one can also find references to ‘enhanced leaf’, which refers to a smoking blend containing organic matter into which DMT has been infused, but which, by definition, does not need to contain MAOi.

None of the terms used to call the concoction, have so far suffused the psychedelic milieu to such the extent that ‘changa’ has - although Palmer has commented that in Australia “many people didn’t like the word ‘changa’, as it sounds too ‘aussie’, or too ‘bogan’. Also, I came up with the name, people felt awkward about that. They felt it was giving me too much power” (Personal Communication, April 22, 2016).

Combining harmala alkaloids with DMT in order to form a potent hallucinogenic is an ancient and intuitive practice of South American shamans. Besides the famous ayahuasca brews, which are ingested orally, there are traditional DMT and MAOi snuffs such as *yopo* snuffs,<sup>22</sup> as well as a number of other traditional concoctions that use this combination. Speaking about the Western underground psychedelic culture, David Nickles commented:

Already for years people around the globe are combining DMT and harmala alkaloids orally, intra-rectally, intra-nasally, it does not seem like such a big stretch to question: “hey what if we put these together and smoke them?”. We all [users] have some sort of basic understanding of what’s going into these psychoactive creations and I think many of us are looking into it in our own ways, so I totally think that multiple people could be the originators of this phenomenon either independently and collaboratively’. (D. Nickles, Personal Communication, February 23, 2016)

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<sup>21</sup> ‘Changa: A smoking Blend Containing Ayahuasca and other Herbs’ (Chocobeastie, 2011), <https://www.dmt-nexus.me/forum/default.aspx?g=posts&t=19331> (Accessed June 1, 2016).

<sup>22</sup> *Yopo* snuffs are traditional snuffs of the Amazonian Yonomami tribe, containing powdered *Anadenanthera Peregrina*, a source of DMT (Jamie & Nen888, 2014).

There is some evidence to support Nickles' point of view. Professor8 is a middle-aged man living in South Africa who has used changa-like mixtures for therapeutic purposes for over twenty years. He explained that he used to smoke *ayahuasca*-like joints before he ever heard the name changa "until one day, about five years ago, a guy showed up at my door and told me: 'I am the Australian king of changa, I heard you are the changa king of Africa!' This man was Julian, and we spent the whole weekend together smoking and talking" (Professor8, Personal Communication, February 18, 2016).

In whatever way the phenomenon is interpreted, it is undeniable that Palmer had an important role in its development. It was he who coined a suitable, colloquial name for the substance and who has contributed heavily to its popularization. Palmer is a prominent character in the Australian psychedelic scene, a brewer and an ayahuasca facilitator himself, and has thus been in the perfect position to foster the use of this new, smokeable DMT-MAOi concoction to local and non-local psychonauts. After having introduced hundreds of people to DMT during the 90s, as he claims in his recent book *Articulations*, Palmer continued his experiments by giving people *Banisteriopsis Caapi* shavings to smoke. He gathered reports from a number of users, in which they discussed the alignment and peace they experienced after smoking the *Caapi* shavings. In 2003 he began to give the smoking mix to people and investigate their reactions, which, he claims, were all very positive (Palmer, 2014, p. 195). Since more than a decade ago Palmer facilitated entheogenic meetings he called 'changa smoking circles', which became opportunities to gather interested individuals, engage in entheogenic experiments and spread the changa phenomenon. He describes these meetings thusly:

People sit in a circle. The facilitator goes around with a bong and gives changa to people one after the other. They lie back, go into it, and have their experience. Then when everyone comes back, we do another round. Up to three rounds, going a bit deeper each time. Then after we have a debrief. (J. Palmer, Personal Communication, April 22, 2016)

Contrary to what one may expect, Australia was not the location of changa's rapid popularization. Palmer believes that this is partly due to the fact that DMT had been

accessible within Australia since the 1990s, and people had grown accustomed to the substance. Palmer claims that by 2006 changa had made its way to the UK, before continuing to blaze around the world. It was not until after this international success that changa was really embraced by the Australian psychedelic milieu, in what Palmer calls a 'cultural cringe phenomenon' (Personal Communication, April 22, 2016). Although the changa smoking mixture had been sold behind the counter of some Australian smartshops between 2005 and 2008, under the name *dreamtime*, many Australians were unaware that this product was the same thing as changa. Palmer argues that it was not until 2010 that the consumption of changa under this latter name began to have a real impact on Australian psychedelic milieu (J. Palmer, Personal Communication, April 22, 2016).

Emerging in the UK around 2006, changa quickly became popular due to its involvement with three key aspects of the Anglo-European psychedelic panorama. First, the EDM (electronic dance music) scene functioned as an incubator for the spread of a number of entheogens, including changa. This smoking mixture became particularly important for the 'psychedelic trance'<sup>23</sup> scene, which was (and still is) active on a global scale. *Erowid.org* attests that the first public appearance of changa in Europe was at the *Boom festival*, Portugal, in 2008, where the substance was distributed by a group of Australian psychonauts. The contents of the mixture was mis-reported, with an online article stating that it was a combination of four legal herbs, in the 'family of DMT and Salvia'<sup>24</sup>.

The psytrance festival scene is a direct descendent of the 1960s hippy counterculture movement and, as the name suggests, the consumption of psychedelic substances is a key practice. Psytrance festivals are particularly popular in Europe, with the number of attendees at a given festival ranging from a few hundred to gatherings of over 35,000 people. Palmer argues that the psytrance scene played a major role in the popularization of

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<sup>23</sup> The term 'psychedelic trance' refers to a genre of electronic dance music that has circulated worldwide since the mid-1990s, and is connected with an occultural milieu that has its roots in the late 1960s, when Western psychedelic travelers converged seasonally on the beaches of Anjuna, India. Known as 'psytrance' or 'psy', it is today a transnational movement whose participants have moved decisively from all-night raves in clubs and industrial areas to all-week festivals held in unique open-air locations, often celebrated upon occasions of astronomical significance, particularly solstices and equinoxes.

<sup>24</sup> Jon Hanna. "Got Changa?". *Erowid*. [erowid.org/chemicals/dmt/dmt\\_article1.shtml](http://erowid.org/chemicals/dmt/dmt_article1.shtml) (Accessed January 2015).



the smoking mixture, and indeed the majority of my interviewees had their first encounter with changa at a psytrance festival event.

Psytrance is a global scene, the people within that scene travel around a lot. That scene brings together a lot of different individuals from a lot of different countries. Anyone can end up at an outdoor doof party in the forest, "door is open", it's not a closed scene. I think that scene had the right mobility to allow this new thing to take over and move around the world as rapidly as it has. This has nothing to do with the music, just like "what's the Grateful Dead got to do with LSD?". It was just that the Grateful Dead were touring around America and that's where people would go, and that's where people go buy LSD. Changa could not really take off in the techno scene; you cannot really smoke it indoors. The psytrance scene is outdoors. I have smoked Changa indoors and, basically, hundreds of people are going to be smelling and asking, "Who's burning the plastic furniture?" (J. Palmer, Personal Communication, June, 2015)

Alongside psytrance festivals, the online entheogenic community has been another key avenue of changa's popularization. This virtual community is comprised of major psychedelic reference websites, such as *Erowid* and *DMTnexus*, as well as innumerable smaller blogs. According to Nickles there have been three main contributors to the popularization of changa: (1) Australians, 'notably being, throughout their psychedelic community, ahead of the curve when it comes to DMT', share information on virtual platforms accessible to people around the world; (2) the introduction of an underground name for the mixture, making its status as a convenient mode of assuming DMT and MAOI recognizable; (3) the increasing online availability of comprehensive and accurate TEK's containing detailed and easy-to-follow instructions on how to extract DMT, a process which has evolved and simplified significantly in recent years. This has made individual experimentation and creation more possible.

I think that sort of Australian contingent combined with internet bottleneck and the Nexus being positioned where it was seven years ago, really contributed to the term changa taking hold and getting spread out to the point where you have got people on the Silk Road that

are selling changa blends where people mistakenly think ‘ah yes, this is that plant that has DMT in the leaf’. (D. Nickles, Personal Communication, February 23, 2016)

Finally, the last key aspect in the popularization of changa is the cultural momentum of the contemporary psychedelic scene, where the potentials of the ‘spirit molecule’ are becoming ever more widely accepted and publicized. In the wake of this enthusiasm, every traditional and contemporary DMT mixture is reaching new heights of popularity. Ayahuasca tourism is witnessing its largest following yet; the *DMTnexus* online forum grew from 6,000 subscriptions in 2009 to about 30,000 in 2016 (D. Nickles, Personal Communication, February 23, 2016); and, according to *U.S. National Survey on Drug Use and Health*, DMT has been the drug with the greatest number of new users per year (Sledge and Grim, 2013). It is easy to understand how, within this DMT-revolution, the changa phenomenon has gained such an enormous following as ‘a story of homegrown alchemy’ (St John, 2015, p. 167) and a revolutionary ‘mechanism for the administration of DMT’ (Mon, 2014, p. 48).

### **3.4 The MAOi Factor**

Apart from its practicality, it is also the MAOi element of the changa mixture that makes it such a unique method of DMT administration. MAOi has a powerful influence over the mixture’s effects, particularly during the coming-up stage. Many regular users of changa believe the MAOi element to be essential; Professor8 claims that “it raises your vibrations, prepares your body” (Personal Communication, February 18, 2016) for the DMT experience. Interestingly, however, the mixture’s ‘father’ is not so convinced of MAOi’s importance. Palmer claims that “whether the blend of herbs contains or doesn’t contain ayahuasca vine or leaf, it can still be called changa as far as I am concerned, though some people may disagree” (Personal Communication, June, 2015) - and indeed many expert users and researchers do. Nickles states that when MAOi is not present, the mixture should be called enhanced leaf (Personal Communication, February 23, 2016). Olympus Mon echoes Nickles. He assumes that “changa is made up of two component infused into organic matter. The two active ingredients are freebase N,N-dimethyltryptamine and freebase harmala alkaloids (including harmine, harmaline and tetrahydroharmine)” (Mon, 2014, p. 48).

Through my observations I discovered that the MAOi element of the mixture is more effective when it is present in an extracted form, for example as freebase alkaloids or as alkaloids purified in alcohol, than when it is simply organic matter, such as dried *Banisteriopsis Caapi* vine.<sup>25</sup> The body needs a large dose of these alkaloids, much higher than the necessary amount of DMT, if the user is to experience a notable effect; an extraction of at least 10x is necessary. Many DIY changa-chemists from across the globe are aware of this, as demonstrated by my interviewees. The MAOi element is fundamental to the creation of an experience that is more grounded, less shocking and more pleasurable than smoking pure crystal plant-extracted DMT.

My respondents each had their own opinions on this topic. Brok explained that the effects of changa are “more friendly and balanced, plus last slightly longer”, than pure DMT. Eaton reported that freebase DMT is too intense and overwhelming, so that it is almost impossible to bring anything back or to ground this experience. Juniper said that her experience with changa is more gentle and deeper than with pure DMT. Igman claimed that changa is more healing, and the space presented is easier to navigate than the one presented by pure DMT effects. Other qualities reported by my respondents, and verified online, are that changa, when compared with DMT, is less harsh on the lungs during smoking (Brok); that it has a better taste and is thus easier to smoke (Juniper); and that the onset of the experience is slightly slower, and the general effect is longer lasting – about three to four minutes longer (Fed).

Changa has other advantages. It is easy to transport, because it looks very similar to tobacco or tea leaves, and it is easier to smoke than DMT crystals, which require specialist instruments. In addition to this, many naive customers prefer changa to DMT because of the organic appearance of the former, “people are not really understanding what they are getting, there is this weird dichotomy of people that are looking for drugs but they only want natural drugs, and even though it is still freebase DMT infused into leaves, the majority of people would prefer the ‘plant matter’ instead of the extracted crystal DMT!”(D. Nickles, Personal Communication, February 23, 2016).

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<sup>25</sup> MAOi can also be effective when ingested orally, for example in a tea, a few hours before the DMT.

Finally, the creation of changa is not such a precise art as the creation of DMT crystals. DMT can be infused into the herb mixture even if it has not crystallised properly; the leftovers from the extraction process and other alkaloids, such as NMT that does not crystallise, can also be dissolved into the mix.

### 3.5 Ayahuasca Analogues

Plants containing DMT have a long history of use by indigenous South American shamans, with DMT being one of the two key active constituents in traditional ayahuasca brews.<sup>26</sup> Although ayahuasca has had a huge influence on Western psychedelic culture, it should not be taken to represent the scene in its entirety.

The use of DMT and similar tryptamines within folk traditions is not simply a relic revived from a long forgotten past, or an exotic cultural artifact reconstructed in contemporary Western culture. We would posit that it represents a range of cultural modalities, both ancient and modern, from indigenous tribal cultures to contemporary Western folk traditions, which have grown beyond the cultural modality comprising ayahuasca in the Western mind. (Jamie and Nen888, 2014, p. 5 )

This is true of no substance more than changa, which overruns cultural boundaries. It could be argued that changa is an appropriation of the antique cultural use of acacia trees in Africa, the Middle East, India, China/East Asia and the Pacific Oceania, each of which had unique traditions of tryptamine-containing plant use (Ratsch, 2005 ; Voogelbreinder, 2009). Osborn speculates that given the presence of acacia trees in Egyptian symbolism, they were likely using the plant for its psychedelic effect (1968). Tibetan Buddhists promote the use of acacia in snuffs during secret rituals (Nen888, 2014). Amazonian tribes use a number of different preparations for DMT-containing plants, including the *yopo* snuff used by the

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<sup>26</sup> There are two major DMT-containing plants used traditionally in ayahuasca brews: *Diplopterys cabrerana*, also known by the indigenous Quechua name *chaliponga*, which contains 5-MeO-DMT alkaloid, a less common structural DMT analogue, and *Psychotria viridis*, or *chacrana*, (in Ecuador this term can also refer to *Diplopterys cabreranam*).

Piaroa, which is made with the seeds of *Anadenanthera Peregrina* (Rodd, 2002). There is some evidence that the *soma* brew, described in the Hindu Vedas, dated to 1500 BCE, contained *Peganum Harmala* (Flattery and Schwartz, 1989). P.D. Newman suggests that the psychoactive nature of acacia was fairly known in certain Masonic circles, at least up until the late 1700s; he states “in the Apprentice and Companion rituals of Count Cagliostro’s Egyptian Rite, the acacia is puzzlingly referred to as being the first matter in a particular and curious alchemical operation” (Newman 2015, p. 16). Further evidence can be found of DMT-containing plants in a variety of traditional and nontraditional religious cults, including the Fatimiya Sufi order and the Santo Daime Church (where *ayahuasca* plays a central role). Changa has often been referred to as the Western ‘evolution of ayahuasca’ (Dorge, 2010), and ‘smokeable ayahuasca’ (Palmer, 2010), however this attribution is problematic. The combination of *Banisteriopsis Caapi*, also known as the ayahuasca vine, with DMT in Palmer’s recipe resembles the composition of the traditional brew; however Mirante (2010) argues that calling changa ‘an evolution of ayahuasca’ neglects the continuing indigenous use of the ayahuasca brew, and is needlessly appropriative of this cultural tradition (also see St John 2015b). I agree with Mirante’s view, for calling changa an ‘evolution of ayahuasca’, fails to acknowledge that changa and ayahuasca are two very different cultural phenomena that arose and continue in separate cultural contexts with different social and historical frameworks. Changa should more accurately be described as an ayahuasca analogue, or *smokable ana-huasca*<sup>27</sup>, given that the most commonly used DMT source for it is *Mimosa Hostilis*, also referred to as *Jurema* (Samorini, 2016), and not the DMT sources used for traditional ayahuasca brews.

However, despite the differing methods of consumption and duration of effects, comparisons between ayahuasca and changa are so-often drawn because of the undeniable similarities in the visionary worlds they offer access to. A number of my interviewees described the visionary effects of changa as being similar to “the peak of an ayahuasca session” (Fed, Giulio, Juniper, Brok, Igman). Changa’s short duration (ten minutes as

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<sup>27</sup> It stands for ayahuasca analogues, and it refers mainly to all those preparations that do not use traditional ayahuasca recipes, but a variation.

opposed to ayahuasca's two to ten hours) does not allow for extended psychedelic investigations.

I can see why some people prefer changa over ayahuasca, but for me personally it is the other way around. Ayahuasca asks more effort but then it's also more rewarding. During the changa experience usually I feel I do not have enough time to really go into it, while ayahuasca has for me the perfect trip length. (Juniper, Interview, January, 2016)

Others still prefer changa because it gives the user the opportunity to have deeply transformative experiences without having to face the unpleasant physical side-effects of an ayahuasca trip (Ded, Frenzi, Andy). In fact, about half of my respondents had never tried ayahuasca, confessing that they are afraid of it.

## 4. A Changa Experience

In this chapter I will explore in a phenomenological sequence how the respondents included in my study narrated their experiences with changa. In the first section I will explore the set and setting,<sup>28</sup> the user's frame of mind and the preferred environment for the experience. This is crucial to properly decode the experiential framework in which each subject operates. Second I will address the parts of the narratives that focus on the content of a changa experience, particularly the visualizations users were subject to, to the extent that my interviewees were able to articulate them. A proper dosage<sup>29</sup> of DMT and MAOI-containing smoking mixtures has the potential to produce a huge variety of visions; thus I have focused on what my interviewees themselves felt to be *the most* significant aspects of their visions. I have not divided these experiences into the categories of 'breakthrough' and lighter experiences, as I wished to focus particularly on how respondents made sense of what they had seen or perceived, independent of the level of intensity. In section 4.3 I have attempted to categorize the main interpretative patterns that my interviewees use. This thematic analysis has been reported back to some of my respondents, in order to test the veracity of it. I will then suggest some recurrent themes across the various experiences of my interviewees in order to unravel the starting points of each individual transformation, highlighting in particular the central role of collaborative interpretation in helping individuals to make sense of – and communicate – their changa experiences' contents. In the final section I will explore how my respondents attempt to integrate the complex data they receive within the changa experience in their cultural frameworks. Analysing how visionary experience can impact one's perception of reality I will give examples from my interviews in order to show how the integration of entheogenic experience can successfully be incorporated into a rational framework.

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<sup>28</sup> The terms 'set and setting' in relation to psychedelic experiences were coined in 1984 by N.E. Zinberg in his book *'Drug, Set and Setting: The Basis for Controlled Intoxicant Use'*. The terms are popularly used to refer to the mental and environmental conditions in which a psychoactive substance is ingested.

<sup>29</sup> It is difficult to define what a proper dosage of changa is, as it depends firstly on the percentage of DMT in the brew and secondly on the presence and form (extract or plant) of MAO inhibitors. The suggested dose of DMT for a breakthrough trip is between 50 to 200 mg.; MAOI enhances the DMT effects and prolongs them. However, potency has proved to be very subjective, dependent upon the users' sensitivity. During my research, I was assured that 200 mg of 40% changa with MAOI plant material smoked in one hit assured a breakthrough experience.

## 4.1 Set & Setting

Within a psychedelic context the term ‘set’ refers to a person’s mental and emotional state prior to the experience; ‘setting’ means the immediate environment within which the experience takes place. The setting may be an outdoor or indoor location; with guides, friends or alone, accompanied by music, artwork, and so on (Turner, 1994, p. 17). D.M. Turner argues that, when dealing with the consumption of psychedelic drugs, better psychological and physical preparation often results in a safer and more positive experience. Psychedelic drugs are always best enjoyed when the body and mind are in good health.

The majority of my interviewees are experienced or conscientious users of psychedelics; they do not undertake psychedelic experiences recreationally, but prefer to partake on specific occasions, or when indulging in a personal quest. Psychedelics are traditionally used not only as recreational drugs but also as therapeutic tools, to induce mystical experiences, or simply to make a journey into outer space. Tribal shamans, *curanderos*<sup>30</sup> and modern healers use psychoactive plants to give assistance to other members of their communities or clients. Around these practices they have created a variety of rituals in order to ground and integrate extra-ordinary experiences in each particular context (Harner, 1980; Metzner, 2013).

Although changa is a very recent Western phenomenon, and thus has no traditional ritual or customs of setting, some of my respondents had developed their own unique ceremonial contexts. Juniper, a 28-year-old freelance journalist and anthropologist from Holland had had experiences with *ayahuasca* and a several other entheogenic plants.

I always do changa, and other entheogens, in a ceremonial context. To me these kinds of substances are *sacraments* in the first place. And I believe and have experienced that treating them as such works most auspiciously. I also read other user’s accounts that said nature is the best setting. This I believe might be true, and it would be nice to try one day. I sit and meditate. I create a ritual setting (altar) beforehand, open the circle, connect to the elements. I try to keep my intention clear in mind, which I’ve been pondering about the

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<sup>30</sup> *Curandero* is the Spanish word meaning ‘the one that heals’. Within the Indigenous cultures of Latin America *curandero* refers to traditional shaman that uses plants and herbs to a variety of diseases.



hours or days before already – that’s where the journey seriously starts – with good preparations. At the same time, I try to be completely open and receiving for what universe (and changa more specifically) wants to say to me. During the experience I try to be fully in that experience, while at the same time I try to observe and remember everything that happens. (Juniper, Interview, January, 2016)

My observations confirmed that users often feel the need for mental preparation ahead of taking changa, which can be a profound and overwhelming experience. Igman, a 40-year-old South African healer and ceremony facilitator, has had twenty years of experience with the consumption of a vast array of entheogens and other synthetic compounds. He stated that he always performs his healing changa sessions in a ceremonial context, after having built a ‘sacred space’. He explains that this preparation helps him to create the perfect conditions for the ceremony, and informs the plant spirits that the experience is being taken seriously. Although he used changa intermittently for eight years, Igman admits that he was always ‘a bit nervous’ before undertaking a changa experience, because ‘one never knows what one might need to deal with’.

Reading online reports of changa users,<sup>31</sup> anxious and concerned feelings precede the smoking act for the vast majority of consumers, a fact confirmed by the narrations of my interviewees. The importance given to set and setting is a response to this. Fed, a 23-year-old musician from Italy, had used psychedelics and other research chemicals as a mean to expand his consciousness, for a few years.

I don’t like to trip with people I don’t trust, so I am mostly smoking changa alone or with a friend I have known since I was a little kid. We usually prepare the setting with some music that we both really like and smoke it at the same time, sitting on the couch. I consider smoking changa alone much more intimate and introspective, but I get quite nervous. If there’s someone with me I feel more relaxed and I’m less likely to have a difficult trip. I often meditate a little before the experience to avoid bad thoughts and to fill my mind with good resolutions and peaceful thoughts. (Fed, Interview, February, 2016)

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<sup>31</sup> My online research utilized a wide variety of websites, reported in the final bibliography, however the central sources are [www.dmt-nexus.me](http://www.dmt-nexus.me) and [www.erowid.org](http://www.erowid.org) (Accessed between January and April 2016).

In his acclaimed book, *The Essential Psychedelic Guide* (1994), D.M. Turner likewise suggests that mental safety is a condition sine qua non to the undertaking of an entheogenic exploration, highlighting that people with recognized mental issues, such as schizophrenia, should approach psychedelic experiences cautiously and only with the guide of a therapist. However Turner claims that most trips will be beneficial for those with mental health issues, particularly those involving plants or plant extracts (therefore including DMT-containing admixtures). Care should be taken, as always, with physical safety, meaning users should not exceed tested dosages or experiment with un-tested ingredient combinations (p. 17).

After some cautious research, Ded, a 44-year-old Italian teacher, decided to self-administer a combination of benzodiazepines (BZD)<sup>32</sup> and changa. In his case, he clarifies, the choice was guided by a personal psychedelic history: when he was 25, Ded experienced a bad trip with LSD, which caused him a long period of anxiety. Since then he stopped using any kind of psychoactive substance. Recently he felt the need to undertake new journeys, and thus began looking for some extra security measures. For him, BZDs act as the 'Linus' blanket, allowing him to be more accommodating and reducing the fear 'which I always have before smoking'.

Meditation is another way to help facilitate a positive changa experience, whether this is performed before or during the trip. Professor8, after having experimented on himself and his clients for about twenty years, recommends users to engage in the practice of Kundalini meditation as explained in the *The Teachings for the Fourth Density Aquarian* (Summer and Rain, 1991). This, combined with a disciplined, regular use of changa, allows one to achieve higher levels of consciousness without being overwhelmed by the intensity of the experience.

You first put yourself in to an Alpha state<sup>33</sup> and you do maybe a little bit of yoga for your body, because your body has to be still, spine straight. The Kundalini meditation is the key

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<sup>32</sup> *Benzodiazepines* refer to a class of psychoactive drugs that were (and somewhere still are) used within mainstream medicine for the treatment of treating anxiety and depression. They have sedative effects.

<sup>33</sup> '*Alpha State* is a condition of relaxed, peaceful wakefulness, devoid of concentration and sensory stimulation. It is characterized by alpha waves at a frequency of 8 to 13 Hz as recorded by an electroencephalograph and is accompanied by feelings of tranquility and a lack of tension and anxiety. Biofeedback training and meditation techniques are used to achieve this state' (Mosby's Medical Dictionary, 2009).

for it all. The key is being able to navigate and get the most out of it, because the colours you see, the archetypes and all that stuff has a meaning, can be understood and if used consciously, it can heal you. (Professor8, Personal Communication, February 18, 2016)

Giulio, 24-year-old Italian farmer experienced with the use of LSD and several other entheogenic compounds, among which changa is his favourite, sings healing sounds before he undertakes a changa experience. He claims that this has a positive effect on his body and helps him to release tension and anxiety. Giulio's preferred setting is deep in nature, where he can 'make contact with the plants and asks for their support during the trip'.

A number of interviewees reported that they had better experiences with changa when smoking near a river or a water source.

I prefer to smoke it outside in a natural area like a lakeside or next to a river. The stimuli I get in these surroundings are a positive support for the psychedelic experience and the internal processes that are going on when I smoke a pipe of changa. (Brok, Interview, January, 2016)

This is not a novel phenomenon, for in 1994 Turner wrote a personal account "of the magical link between DMT and water, that DMT is most compatible when used in the vicinity of water" (p. 81). This account was a result of his positive personal experiences tripping in environments surrounded by water, and from a communication received by a leprechaun creature encountered during an altered state of consciousness, which informed him that 'DMT is a Water spirit' (1994, p. 81). Professor8 reported that when he cannot have a natural water source, he chooses to smoke changa in the toilet, so as to stay close to the water element.

During my participant observation I encountered a significant number of users smoking the compound in less private and more challenging settings, such as festival dance floors or crowds at open-air events. Luke, a 33-year-old English PhD student, who uses naturally sourced psychoactives on a regular basis, also narrated this. He claimed that the dancefloor

is his preferred setting for a trip, where he can have incredible ecstatic experiences while “connecting with the positive energy of the people”. According to Palmer dance floors can be considered a sacred playground, and many experienced users intentionally choose them in order to accomplish specific mysterious and other worldly missions, which we cannot be aware of (J. Palmer, Personal Communication, June, 2015).

The majority of my interviewees appeared to put a large amount of effort into the preparation of their set and setting, a process that enables them to feel mentally prepared and physically safe. There are no specific rules for how to approach a changa experience; each user develops their own ideal set and setting based on subjective preferences. Being calm, prepared, clear-headed and comfortable are extremely important factors if one is to have a positive psychedelic experience; this is nowhere more true than with DMT and admixtures, for the strong visionary aspect of a DMT trip is well acknowledged.

#### **4.2 The Content of Experiences**

When questioning interviewees about the content of the most significant experience they had with changa, I encountered a number of different reactions. While a considerable number of respondents narrated significant, life-changing experiences in other realities,<sup>34</sup> others were hardly capable of articulating any meaningful narration of their experiences. Some interviewees claimed not to remember anything clear, although the experience had left them with vivid sensations - sensations that, although incommunicable, resulted in meaningful interpretations. For instance, Fredo translated his unspeakable journey as a captivating metaphysical insight, suddenly “knowing where I was before I was born in this body”. Thus although he could not communicate the experience itself, it was clearly significant. Having a not communicable experience in this context, does not mean that the user would not interpret it as significant. On the contrary, not communicable experiences often result in very meaningful insights.

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<sup>34</sup> When talking about *the most* significant experience, users mostly (but not exclusively) referred to ‘breakthrough’ experiences, which appear to result in more meaningful insights. I decided not to include this particular aspect in my research, as I did not identify it as relevant. What matters here are the very contents, and interviewees’ interpretation of them.

Zeno, a 27-years-old Italian composer who smoked changa only once, claimed the content of the experience was “something I cannot really express in words, our language cannot really explain what I just experienced”. Gionni, a 33-year-old Italian chef who is an occasional user of entheogens, reports:

I cannot describe in words the content of my experience, but I can tell that I grasped the essence of life. I, for the first time and in a very unique way, understood that there is a lot more than what I thought it was all about, a lot more than matter. I saw all the scheme of life. It is impossible for me to talk about it. But I am now very aware of it. (Gionni, Interview, December, 2015)

Fredo, Zeno and Gionni all had incommunicable yet life-changing experiences. Before these experiences their interest in the metaphysical was close to zero; after, they felt the need to start a personal search, for the answer to the many questions the experience had brought. Changa experiences thus catalysed transformative processes, even if the experiences themselves were incommunicable.

Being so similar in their chemical make-up, it is little surprise that aspects of the ayahuasca visions and the changa ones have something in common. Several of my informants expressed the opinion that the effects of changa are like those at the peak of an ayahuasca session, although in the former the duration is too short for the completion of a whole vision quest. Although different cultural objects with distinctive physical and psychoactive effects, changa and ayahuasca visions share many similarities. Benny Shanon, in his ambitious quantitative study of ayahuasca experiences entitled *The Antipodes of the Mind*, notes that what can be seen in ayahuasca visions is unbounded, “there is no limit to it” (2002, p. 136). The same could be surely said of changa. Shanon arranges the content of ayahuasca visions in four broad semantic domains: (a) natural, (b) cultural, (c) fantasy and (d) spiritual and supernatural, categories that can be used equally well to delineate changa visions - although it is arguable that such domains are so broad that could be used to classify any kind of vision, dream or experience. The most crucial factor to this comparison is the reports of the users themselves, many of whom found the two substances’ visionary effects

analogous. I will explore Shanon's classifications in more depth, illustrating them with examples drawn from my interviewees' changa experiences and my own.

(a) Within the *natural* domain, Shanon refers to natural landscapes, such as forests or magnificent gardens, with different sorts of animals, or the cosmos in its depth (p. 132). While in *ayahuasca* visions serpents, birds and felines are often encountered, with changa this does not seem to be a *topos*<sup>35</sup>. Pilo, a 35-year-old Spanish psychonaut who has made of experimenting with drugs his life mission, narrated to me a magnificent experience where he visited an unknown natural landscape teeming with friendly animals, mostly white bears, amazing trees and flowers. He described how a bear took him to a special fountain, filled with coloured water. "The bear told me that that fountain is the source of all rainbows", he happily said. Several interviewees also narrated experiences in which they felt themselves melting into the surrounding nature, becoming one with it; as for instance Fed reported that "I was part of a greater design: everything is one and one is everything. I was one with nature, that felt amazing".

(b) The *cultural* category refers to the products of artistic creations, religion and magic, such as buildings, temples and magnificent cities (Shanon, 2002, p. 134). I would also add to this category encounters with human beings of different cultural origins, for often the content of visions does not pertain to the user's own socio-cultural tradition, but recalls ancient or distant traditions. Frenzi, a 34-year-old Italian ethnobotanist with a strong passion for mind altering substances mostly LSD, had such a trip: he was with his girlfriend in a van; he smoked and kept staring at her. Suddenly, she transformed into an African tribal woman, and then into an Eskimo, an Egyptian, a Japanese and a South American woman. He was so astonished by the abundance of specifics within these visions—her jewels, the changing skin colours, the mutations of her mouth shape—that towards the end of the experience his amusement gave way to tears. "It was all so unbelievably sharp and real", he claimed. By building the intention across several changa sessions, Professor8 explained me that he was able to develop an inter-dimensional connection with a number of ancient mythical traditions, such as the Atlantis civilization and the Mystery Schools of Egypt. He was able to

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<sup>35</sup> *Topos*, in Greek rhetoric, refers to a standardised method of constructing or delineating an argument.

read their books, explore the amazing architecture of their temples and communicate with religious authorities.

(c) The category *fantasy* pertains to enchanted and magical lands, populated by beings which appear to be neither human, nor animal (Shanon, 2002, p. 135). Within this category I would also include all that which is not part of 'normal' reality, such as visits to other dimensions and parallel universes, distortions in space and time, and encounters with alien beings. The domain of fantasy could be described as having a *topos* close to that of the cinematographic genre of science fiction, and is very common within changa experiences. Ded described an encounter with "a weird humanoid like creature made of gel, floating in the air, with a very big head from which some light coloured rays were diffusing in the room. He was looking at me, and he was angry with me just because I could see him. He did not want me to discover his presence".

Brok, a 26-year-old Dutch biologist and music teacher, had his first mushroom trip when he was 14 and had continued to experiment with a variety of methods for altering consciousness ever since, in particular ayahuasca and LSD. He described to me one of his most intense sci-fi themed changa experiences:

I was transported to a white vortex, where I met my friend Shane. He was wearing strange wizard like clothes. In the vortex there was no gravity, nothing. Only light and my friend Shane. Then I started a telepathic conversation with him, we were sharing information about life, nature and the wellbeing of Earth. Telepathically he was communicating things to me that I did not know before. (Brok, Interview, January, 2016)

Fredo is a 27-year-old Italian DJ and anthropologist well-practiced with a variety of entheogens. He described how, while he was under the effect of changa, he felt like he intercepted a radio signal. Fredo cannot remember the whole content of the vision, but when the effects finished he had three names in his mind: B49, Asimov and missile. Not knowing what these words would mean he searched online, and discovered that Isaac Asimov is a famous sci-fi writer, within whose books missiles feature prominently, and that B49 stands for the Andromeda galaxy—so the elements were all related. Fredo emphasises that often he cannot remember the content of his changa trips. This meant that he had to

exert a substantial effort in order to narrate them during our interviews. Despite this effort Fredo was dissatisfied by the descriptions he gave, claiming that they were insignificant when compared with the actuality and profoundness of his experiences.

In contrast Andy, a 28-year-old Italian filmmaker, who only recently started using DMT and other mind altering substances, can remember his travels so well that he is able to narrate them in detail, and often writes reports afterwards. Andy claims that he has a strong and benign relationship with entities he meets in other dimensions. While he has never seen these beings, because – he explains - they lack a tangible body, he feels that they communicate with him telepathically. He enjoys visiting them and they always welcome him into their presence.

I am sitting on my bed. Slowly a door opens on the ceiling, the door is depicted with an Arabian design from which several planetary orbits are projected. I find myself without a body in an unknown world, I am surrounded by presences. I realize that these are the entities that I met last time. However, they are not human. Many different universes and different times and spaces overlap, following each other at an incredible speed. This procession is accompanied by high-pitched, snappy sounds. My body does not exist anymore. I look around and I realize that these presences are around me, and they seem to care for me. They are like doctors who try to cure me – but the only cure is to find the universe which I came from. Time seems to pass very fast, as I see thousands of different time-lines occurring around me. It is as if I was in a capsule flowing fast through time, but I cannot really interact with it. I had the feeling that years had passed. I had almost abandoned the search for my original universe, convinced that the people there were already extinct. (Andy, Interview, December, 2015)

Andy almost decided to remain in this other dimension. Although this may sound like a frightening experience, Andy was not afraid – he recounts it with positive and gentle feeling. Andy appreciates the world changa opens to him, explaining “there I always learn something important for my perception of reality”.

Within the domain of fantasy I also include experiences where users report the feeling of being reprogrammed. During one of his changa trips, Giulio felt a luminous blanket of energy covering him, changing his internal frequencies and bringing awareness and healing



to his body. Similarly, Fredo described a session during which he felt reprogramming occurring “on a genetic level”. He saw green rays surround his body; he remains convinced that there were aliens involved in the process, though exact memories of the event have vanished. Interestingly Fredo had had no interest in extra-terrestrial beings before this event. As a number of other users have narrated similar experiences, ‘reprogramming’ appears to be a common theme of changa visions.

*Spiritual and supernatural* (d) experiences were also present in many of my interviewees’ narrations and in my own visionary experiences. Within this domain Shanon places all encounters with divine or semi-divine beings, and any experience with which is associated spiritual and metaphysical meaning (2002, p. 135). Within the chapter in which he analyses the content of ayahuasca visions, there is a large section devoted to ‘*The Divine*’, which includes encounters with Gods (p. 130). Eaton, a 27-year-old English technician, has had a large amount of experiences with MDMA and other synthetic drugs, but less with natural psychoactives. During one changa trip he met “a blue woman with multiple arms; she was coming very close to me, overwhelming me with positive emotional feelings, while she was transforming her faces continuously in three different shapes and pulling her tongue”. Eaton felt that this experience was somehow more real than actual reality, although he did not understand who this being was. One day, when reading reports by other changa users, Eaton found a number of people had encountered this same figure, whom they identified as the Hindu goddess Kali. Researching images of the Goddess online, he surprisingly discovered that “It was her... I was astonished; I had no previous knowledge about Kali or Hindu religion. It was intense and mind opening”. Hindu divinities appear to be a common changa visualization evidenced by a proliferation of online reports. These divinities rarely talk, but transmit their messages through telepathically. Izzy, a 32-year-old Dutch clerk with a long history of experience with psilocybin, DMT and LSD, reported one such occurrence:

It was the time I decided to listen a composition of my own, right at the peak and then ... five majestic Hindu-like deities appeared against a black backdrop, and they started gracefully dancing to my music while telepathically making clear that I should open my heart and not fear others that do not see the beauty in my composition. (Izzy, Interview, December, 2015)

Narrating these experiences many of my respondents claimed that the encounter was ‘so amazing that the mind could not contain the beauty’ – something Shanon also found within his research (p. 135). Metaphysical or spiritual experiences with changa may involve a connection with the realm of spirits and one’s spirit guide. Juniper describes how she had a “quick alignment with the forces of life and love”.

My changa experience, I would describe as connecting to my ‘higher self’, that which is God in me. It’s hard to explain, but it is a voice within me that both guides me and transcends me. This voice reassured me that I am on the right path, that I can relax in being myself and that all will be well. (Juniper, Interview, February, 2016)

Users who engage with psychoactive substances on a more regular basis report experiences that are more lucid and clear. They are often able to interact with the effects more consciously, without being completely overwhelmed by them. This is the case for Igman, who uses neoshamanic techniques in his healing ceremonies, and uses changa in particular as a tool to “enter into a space that exists around us all the time, but that we are not usually aware of - so it is like lifting the veil. I enter into the realm of spirits, either to undertake healing work or to learn new healing tools. Recently, the spirits have begun to teach me how to work with rattles within the sacred space”.

Alex, a 36-year-old Italian spiritual counselor who had had only a few psilocybin experiences, smoked changa just once, resulting in an experience that he describes as having profoundly changed his perception of life.

Before I began smoking my heart had already started beating very fast. I openly expressed the intention to experience death, which has been a common theme in my life, since my parents died when I was young. I was very nervous and excited. I smoked. I was alone in my working room. All became very bright, it seemed fake, as if I was in a plastic world. I could see psychedelic patterns rising in the walls up to the ceiling; it felt like I was in an elevator. It all went very fast, unexpected. All of a sudden I lost control of myself. I fell down onto the carpet, drawn by a mysterious force. I began to feel like I was going mad. The force wanted me to surrender. So I did. And then I saw all the elements of my life disappearing, as if they had never existed. I saw my life falling into pieces. It seemed that my reality was just a

hallucination, created by myself. Everything I believed to be real was dissolving. How could I explain to my friends, my relatives, that I was their creator? Everyday life is just an illusion. Then I realized I was dying. Alone, in my studio. I wanted to reach for my phone to call someone to help me. But why? I am just dying. It is best to surrender, I thought. When I stopped resisting the sensation of death I felt something incredibly calm and peaceful: the cosmic void. However, it was not the time for me to go. All of a sudden I felt a rebirth. That mysterious force gave birth to me again, on the carpet in my studio. (Alex, Interview, January, 2016)

Experiences of death and rebirth are not unusual with psychedelics in general. Shanon notes these types of experiences occur particularly often in ayahuasca drinkers, and that those who have such experiences usually equate them with salvation (Shanon, 2002, p. 145). This was not the case with Alex's experience, however; he did not describe his experience as salvation at any time, but rather claims to have understood that death is a natural part of life, that it is a graceful process, and so stopped fearing it.

Psychedelic experiences are deeply subjective both in their visionary effects and in their personal outcomes. Changa experiences can sometimes be also very dark and scary, resulting in what are commonly called 'bad trips'. While I was collecting my interviews I one day received a message from Fredo. He wanted to speak with me about something extremely important. The night before he had had an awful experience with changa, and felt that the other world—the 'changa world'—was no longer the same. The forces of darkness, "the wicked alien enemies of humankind", had conquered that world. He wanted me to know that everything in that parallel universe is now faked and made of plastic, and that no one could save it. During this experience Fredo felt the negative, very rarely reported, physical side-effects of changa, such as nausea, for the first time.

There is no real limit to changa's visionary world. It is thus difficult to find fixed and recurrent visionary themes, as visualizations appear to vary hugely from person to person. Although comparisons of the content of changa visions can be made, it is far easier – and more profitable – to compare the interpretations subjects make of their experiences. I investigated these interpretations in detail during my interviews, and in the next section suggest some patterns that appeared.

### 4.3 Interpretive Patterns

Throughout the huge variety of narrations of the changa experience that I collected, there were some similarities in the way disparate interviewees attempted to make sense of their extraordinary experiences. In this section I will attempt to describe these in order to delineate some possible interpretive patterns, which I utilised in the analysis of my data. In order to test the relevance of these patterns I fed them back to some of my interviewees, all of whom agreed with my thematic division. Although further patterns could undoubtedly be found through further analysis, I believe that those I have isolated are the most relevant for the concerns of this research, and are true to the foci of the narrations I collected.

Some of my respondents claimed that their changa experience was an episode of *psychedelic gnosis*. By this term I mean a subjective and experiential opening of the mind towards the inner knowledge of our divine nature, beyond science and rationality, often facilitated by the use of entheogens (Gaia 2015). Through the process of *psychedelic gnosis*, the “very nature of our souls allows us direct access to the supreme, eternal substance of Being” (Hanegraaff, 2012, p. 406). The term *psychedelic* in this context refers to all transformations of consciousness that are possible, either in individuals or in social groups, while *gnosis*, meaning knowledge, represents the liminal space created by ecstatic experience that induced by various techniques of ‘shattering and reshaping identities’ (D’Andrea, 2004). Through this ecstasy the individual can be reconnected with the unitary nature of being and experience a deeply subjective and experiential form of knowledge. In contrast with knowledge obtained through reason or faith, the knowledge obtained by *gnosis* is strictly personal, non-verifiable and incommunicable (Hanegraaff, 2008, p. 139). Such knowledge is nevertheless life changing, and of the utmost significance for those who receive it.

As illustrated by the experiences of Zeno, Gionni and Fredo, the changa experience can catalyse a unique moment in an individual’s life. The content of such experience can be hardly communicable and, clearly, unverifiable through either rational or scientific means. Subjects believe that this experience is intensely meaningful, represents a turning point in their lives, and is a profoundly transformative event. Often such experiences drive those who undergo them towards spiritual or religious endeavors, apparently being able to

disclose mystical secrets and epistemological mysteries of different kinds. The rational mind is thus confronted with something so inconceivable that language is unable to express it in entirety. For those who experience it for the first time, psychedelic gnosis can also function as an initiation, lifting the veil to what lies beyond ordinary sensation. A period of research and decoding is thus necessary if one is to integrate this new awareness into ones epistemological context.

Smoking changa is also often described as a *neo-shamanic experience*. When 'shamanism' is used in the context of the Western entheogenic milieu, it usually refers to the appropriation of ecstatic techniques rationally used by *curanderos* or shamans, including the utilization of plants and brews included in the '*New World narcotic complex*'<sup>36</sup> (La Barre, 1970). Terence McKenna, often identified as the Western prophet of New World shamanism, was the first to introduce the idea of neo-shamanism. Thanks to his propaganda, neo-shamanism has become a central focus between Western psychonauts; neo-shamanism's meaning is unclear and continuously shaped and reshaped by the intellectual milieu of practitioners and entheo-interested, but it still refer to an individual re-interpretation of traditional shamanic practices. Within the context of the modern archaic revival (McKenna), neo-shamanism consists of a broad range of beliefs and practices that involve alteration of consciousness, mostly induced (although not necessarily) by entheogens, and communication with spirit worlds (Harner, 1980). These practices are principally used as tools for healing and for inter-dimensional exploration. The key difference between indigenous shamanism and neo-shamanism is a focus by the latter on personal development and self-healing. The DIY ethos of the entheogenic movement has fostered the idea of psychonauts as self-sufficient shamans, who no longer need the assistance of a guide or supplier but perform acts of self-shamanising (Tramacchi, 2006, p. 35). Due to the illegal status of many entheogenic compounds, users often do learn how to produce or gather the materials they need independently and autonomously from natural world.

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<sup>36</sup> New World Narcotic Complex is a hypothetical pattern of entheogen use that encompasses the ritual use of tobaccos; the Caribbean Cohoba snuff; morning glory; Datura; psilocybin mushrooms; entheogenic cacti; and others in the vast pharmacopeia of South American psychogenic plants (La Barre, 1970).

Belief in the separability of the body and the soul – for instance the belief that healing on the astral plane can help restore the body in the physical plane, is also characteristic of neo-shamanic experience. Within my respondents' narrations, neo-shamanic experiences are often interpreted as involving a DIY connection with an astral plane, resulting in self-healing or personal growth. Such experiences are described by Alex (who had a death and rebirth experience in connection with the spiritual world), Giulio (who melted with the natural landscape thus becoming one with the spirit of Earth), Andy (who experienced other time-lines in the spiritual world) and Juniper (that uses changa to connect with her higher spiritual self). Igman and Professor8 apply their self-developed neo-shamanic techniques to clients, curing addictions or mental and physical disease. Drawing inspiration from ancient forms of indigenous shamanisms, neo-shamanic experiences often involve the creation of a ceremonial set and setting, as well as the establishment of a clear intention for the otherworldly mission. My observations also suggest that, in order to interpret their experience in a neo-shamanic context, a subject must have already developed the ability to work on a spiritual level, have had prior experience with alterations of consciousness and have some knowledge about the aims of shamanism.

When the user is subject to a marvellous visionary experience, its contents are interpreted and narrated as an *aesthetic experience*. The word aesthetic means 'pertaining to sense of perception'. One can have an aesthetic experience in natural landscapes, such as that which Pilo described (where he met the source of all rainbows in a paradisiacal natural landscape), or in the cultural sphere, as that which happened to Frenzi (who traveled through ethnic archetypes in his girlfriend's face). A similar transpersonal experience was reported by the visionary psychedelic artist Alex Grey, with his wife Allyson. They saw "every face of humanity wash across the face of our adored one. Allyson became every woman and every animal and for her I became all men and all animals" (2000, 9).

A narrative of an aesthetic experience is usually extremely detailed on the sensory level, for within such an experience the senses are overwhelmed by the new perceptions enabled by an altered state of consciousness. Such a feeling was described by Andy, who reported having extremely sharp visions, a sense of awe and enhanced feelings of intra-dimensional love. The content of the vision often appears to be less important to the subject than its intensity and sharpness. This is true of the detailed trip narrations I gathered, such as those

from Frenzi and Professor8, where the subject observed art and other cultural products in another dimension or another time, describing strange architectures and the appearance of strange beings. However this is also true of those visions from which subjects can only remember their feelings; subjects described the way they felt overwhelmed by a sense of beauty, fear, or awe. Aesthetic psychedelic experiences are an inspiration for artists around the globe. Alex Grey claims:

Due to its visionary richness, I think the entheogenic experience has great importance for fuelling an artistic and cultural renaissance. By giving artists a meaningful experience and access to deeper and higher aspects of their soul, they are given a subject worth making art about. (Grey, 2000, p. 9)

The artistic current named *visionary art* has been entirely inspired by visions that occur during altered states of consciousness, mostly, but not exclusively, caused by DMT (Grey, 2000). Usually aesthetic experiences are sensational, but not life-changing in the way that a psychedelic gnosis often is. In some cases the interpretive patterns must be combined in order to make sense of particularly detailed experiences, such as Izzy's meeting with Hindu deities, where aesthetic elements are included within a neo-shamanic framework. In this specific case Izzy reported that the changa experience generates both a sense of awe and its desired effect of self-healing.

Finally, another frequent narrative in the interpretation of changa visions is their being a *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*, a Latin locution literally meaning a 'fearful and fascinating mystery'. This draws from Rudolf Otto's concept of the 'numinous', an experience that underlies all religious beliefs. Thus in this context we are dealing with *numinous experiences*. 'Numinous' can be divided into the three elements of *mysterium*, referring to 'the other', i.e. something entirely different from anything we experience in ordinary life; *tremendum*, meaning that it provokes terror, presenting itself as an overwhelming power; and *fascinans*, because it has a potent charm and a strong attractiveness (Otto, 1923).

In fact, Otto's concept of numinous seems to mirror the phenomenology of changa experience as a whole. The changa experience first presents the user with an incredible new

reality, a reality that is so overwhelming it often provokes fear and awe. Although frightening, the experience is fascinating, and the subject is often charmed by its awe-full mystery. Although Otto's definition thus mirrors the changa experience on a general level, the equivalence of each individual experience with these categories is variable. Users acquainted with psychedelics are less likely to fear the new worlds they are confronted with, and those who have prior spiritual often escape the changa-world's mysterious charm. The *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* chiefly affects those embedded in an atheist or skeptic framework; subjects such as Eaton, who was both shaken and charmed by his meeting with Kali, and Ded, whose meeting with discarnate entities forced him to reconsider his metaphysical skepticism.

However, the majority of my respondents describe smoking changa as an overwhelming experience, which is often scary or shocking, and should always be done with a sense of sacredness and respect. Changa appears to give all those who smoke it access to a universe of feelings and visions that are inaccessible within our disenchanting consensus reality. Because of this, subjects are often unsure as to how they should behave in this alternate context. Although thus subject to feelings of fear and uncertainty, changa is still described as an attractive and, in many cases, a healing experience. I have experienced first-hand the terror of meeting unknown realities, and the feelings of powerlessness this brings. I felt my own insignificance in comparison to the power of such unspeakable mystery, and I perceived the numinous in all its strength. Although overwhelmed by these magnificent and dreadful sensations, I was charmed and attracted by the realms I faced. The changa experience is thus a place of coinciding opposites, combining pleasure and sorrow, adoration and fear, and knowledge and uncertainty. The (un)reality the subject faces induces so many doubts and questions, that any rational and inquisitive mind would feel the need to journey further in order to understand – or eventually surrender themselves to the inexplicability of the changa phenomenon. Processing the content of my personal experiences, and struggling to accept them without any scientific explanation, changa became my antidote against skepticism and disenchantment. In the next section, I will investigate how my respondents processed their unique experiences.



#### 4.4 Processing the Inexplicable

Analysing my respondents' accounts, I have concluded that alterations of consciousness catalysed through the use of changa have the potential to profoundly impact one's perception of reality, often leaving the subject lost in the realm of rational uncertainty. A relativistic approach provides the best framework to explain the huge disparity between subjects' interpretations of the effects of DMT and their ultimate significance. During my conversation with David Nickles, moderator and editor of *DMTnexus*, we discussed this problem.

To my mind the biggest, and perhaps most potentially resonating effect of DMT, is to propagate a general agnosticism. If you talk with fifty different people, you will have fifty different theories about what is going on. Even if you find a whole of common ground between them, and similar themes, at the end of the day anyone will have their own experience and a personal interpretation of it. (D. Nickles, Personal Communication, February 23, 2016)

Agreeing with Nickles, I believe that changa, which is gaining the status of the most popular contemporary DMT smoking mixture, can be used as a tool to (re)introduce uncertainty within a user's life, in either a positive or a negative way, and consequently in the overall perception of society and the world. This section will explore users' opinions on 'the changa experience' broadly, in an attempt to show how subjective, and difficult to articulate, the process of interpretation is. The narratives collected here are the answers to an open question I posed during my interviews, 'what do you think of the changa experience?'. It is important to remember that this question was asked immediately after respondents had narrated the content of their experiences, which was sometimes quite an arduous process, and is thus their first attempt to rationally process the visionary data in the interview context. During the previous section about content narrativization there was little focus on conscious exploration and interpretation – this section is thus valuable for the task of understanding the phenomenology of the individual meaning-making process.

Caio, 21-year-old Brazilian student involved in the *Santo Daime* church, expressed his radical interpretation of the mixture's role in people's lives very concisely, claiming "changa changes life for the better". Caio believes changa to be a panacea that can work for everyone, as it did for him. For him the reality presented by changa is just as real as our everyday reality, and is full of good entities and symbolic teachings that could help humanity to evolve for the better. John, a 25-year-old occult researcher from Oregon accustomed to the use of mind-altering compounds, chiefly Ketamine, thinks that more people should start smoking changa, as it could help open them "towards the amazing infinity of universe secrets waiting to be discovered". Fed claims that the use of changa is a learning and growing process, claiming that every experience, whether communicable or not, left him with a good memory and a new piece of knowledge, "it does not matter how the trip goes, you always come back with something that makes you grow as an individual". Similarly Giulio believes that these experiences act as guidance for one's life, opening the gates to spiritual awareness. Floria, 29-year-old German juggler who had had his first LSD experience four years before our encounter and had decided to engage in deeper exploration with a variety of entheogens, suggested that changa could have a tremendous benefit for humankind, being a true medicine and not simply a drug. Igman commented that changa is probably an ancient mind-expanding and cathartic habit, new to our rationalistic Western world, but necessary for a positive evolution of humankind. Eaton is uncertain as to what he thinks of the changa experience in general. He thinks that changa's effects need to be researched scientifically. He suspects, however, that the places he visits while under the effects of the mixture are not just imaginary, but that "it is an altered state of mind that enables people to see and perceive other existing realities". Ded is sure of this: "there are beings, entities, whatever you want to call them. They are there, outside from us. They communicate with us, it is absolutely unquestionable that they are not the production of our minds, they exist independently". For him, changa is something magical, that commands fear and respect; a true *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*<sup>37</sup>. Ded argues that people should be scared of changa - not in a negative way, but in order to be better prepared to face its strength. Brok feels that the intensity and short duration of a changa trip means that

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<sup>37</sup> See section 4.4 for a full explanation of the terms.

the experience can be too overwhelming. He believes that it takes a long time to recollect and understand the content of a changa experience – if the subject is ever able to reconcile it with normal reality at all. However Brok still believes that changa experience can be extremely valuable; particularly when lower dosages are taken “changa helps find rest and peace of mind, giving loving and equilibrated feelings”. Izzy, who used to be a habitual consumer before deciding to quit all psychedelic drugs, has a very critical opinion on DMT-containing mixtures.

I think the experience is overhyped amongst aficionados, who all too often seem to suffer from a pessimistic worldview. I would say DMT makes people think science and much of the modern world, including modern medicine, is evil. (Izzy, Interview, December, 2015)

Izzy's ideas are now dictated by a firm refusal to look outside the domain of science and rationality. He suggests that DMT should be used within neuroscience to map the details of visual processing and to shine light on some of the more esoteric aspects of cognition and perception.

Although many of my respondents had contradictory or overly idealistic views of the changa experience, many of them share the belief that it can be used as a tool to heal and evolve. In some cases, through opening the subject to the existence of other levels of reality and parallel worlds, the changa experience can undermine the cause-and-effect basis of the scientific mind-set. This can result in refusal, fear and critique on the one hand, and awe, gratitude and acceptance on the other. It is this paradoxical aspect of the changa experience which makes its interpretation so problematic. As Juniper states,

I don't have one final answer or explanation, but I like to contemplate about all possible theories [that might explain changa effects]. I have noticed that my own theories have changed over the years, and I expect that this will continue. Actually, I have stopped searching for the perfect theory; I understand that theories are just tools through which one can ultimately get beyond the rational mind. (Juniper, Interview, January, 2015)

Integrating such extraordinary experiences into everyday life is often interpreted by users as a struggle against disenchantment and rational thinking. It requires curiosity towards the

unknown and the courage to accept the lack of a definitive explanation. For some respondents integrating the changa experience into their life thus meant accepting the innate mystery of the substance. Such users gave up questioning the rational meaning of the experience, and tended to end up with a richer spiritual life. Other respondents reacted to changa's mystery by refusing it, insisting on rigid scientific rationalism. For others still the lack of rational certainty involved is a reason to reflect further on their personal understanding of reality. In all the cases the changa experience sparks a process of subjective transformation, whether short-lived or lasting the rest of a user's life; this is the focus of next chapter.

## 5. The Phenomenology of Transformation

This chapter focuses on how my respondents integrated the changa experience into their everyday lives, focusing on how they were transformed by these experiences in the long term.<sup>38</sup> I approached the materials in phenomenological succession, dividing transformations into three parts: the first section focuses on personal transformations, including self-healing and metamorphic psychological processes enacted by the changa experience; the second section gives a short overview of how my respondents' worldviews developed subsequent to their experience with the visionary changa world, focusing on how these changes effected their relationships with society and other individuals; in the third section I investigate how the changa experience has transformed my respondents' understanding of the realm of supernatural, briefly addressing the compelling question 'what is it, exactly, that we are looking at when we are faced with changa's alternate reality?'. Finally I will present a short list summarizing the most common transformative qualities attributed to changa.

### 5.1 Self-Transformations

In this section, I will focus on how my respondents describe the long-term personal transformations induced by their changa experiences, investigating the role these play in re-shaping their personal habits, lifestyles, and their beliefs. The visionary changa experience can induce a transformation that is understood by some users as an *awakening*. This is a very popular topic within entheogenic literature, especially that concerned with DMT and related mixtures. Some entheo-enthusiasts claim that DMT is the most powerful tool for personal awakening, and will be the key to allowing human beings to move towards a positive and conscious social evolution, instead of a social collapse (DeKorne, 1994). In this section I narrow my investigation on individual developmental processes that are enacted by changa, as reported by the subjects of my research. Although the consumption of an

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<sup>38</sup> Long-term here indicates a timespan of three months to one year.

extended array of entheogens plus diverse external factors might work cooperatively in order to reframe consciousness, through my observations I have gathered the impression that changa accelerates any other previously enacted metamorphic process, and as such is extraordinarily potent. For some respondents just one changa experience has been enough to initiate a transformation.

In our informal interview, Eaton explained that the changa experience has opened his mind to belief in the existence of other realities, showing him the vast array of human possibilities and fueling his appreciation of life and of the universe: “it is like my mind used to be in auto-pilot, so I was missing out the journey. But now, I am awakened and I am aware of what I do’. This transformation brought Eaton increased happiness and self-confidence. In this context, awakening means ‘taking control of one’s life’ ”. Similarly, Fed claims that changa helped him to realize that, in general, he can be quite absent-minded about the consequences of his actions, which had led him to make wrong choices or act inappropriately in the past. He feels that smoking changa improved his awareness and sensibility, making him more secure about himself, his metaphysical thoughts and beliefs. “Since I discovered changa, my life is going better and better”, he admits.

Changa users might claim to have experienced personal consistent improvements in their abilities and quality of life. This is certainly the case for Fredo. After what he calls a first “learning period”, during which he would use changa once a week, and other psychedelics more occasionally, Fredo began a process of deep transformation. Through this inner individual process, almost unconsciously, he gained new awareness of the fact that reality is not factual data, but a personal elaboration. He became convinced that some alien intelligence had reprogrammed him during a changa session and that since this occasion his auditory capacity had increased. Fredo’s career as music producer suddenly sped-up and evolved. He began to use sound as a language, in a suggestively natural and harmonic manner, unknown to him before. He also explained: “I can now better feel the energies I have around, for the good and for the bad. I also stopped eating meat, which made me feel a lot better”. Fredo has no doubts that changa played a central role in reshaping his ego, personal relationships and awareness for the very better, even leading him to acquire new sensory abilities, as the auditory one.

A changa experience might appear to affect either the psychological or the spiritual sphere of user's life, depending on subjective understandings. The two spheres often appear to be interwoven, or even corresponding, especially if considering healing potentials:

If, for instance I am suffering from PTSD<sup>39</sup> or I am having an hard time with interpersonal relationships, I don't see a practical distinction between having experienced healing on a spiritual level, which means gaining a profound understanding that treating other people poorly results in emotional vulnerability or blockages, and a standard therapeutic process. To me it seems that the spiritual and the therapeutic are remarkably intertwined. (D. Nickles, Personal Communication, February 23, 2016)

Within my respondents' accounts, healing often comes through an increased awareness of the spiritual plane, or through the solution of personal issues that manifest while the subject is in an altered state of reality. Igman, who firmly believes in the existence of spiritual beings and other dimensional realities, consider the healing processes to be directly and necessarily connected with the spiritual realm. He states that "changa has enriched how I view myself in a spiritual context. Through this, it has enhanced the understanding of who and what I am as a being... for instance I never would have thought I would have the ability to heal others". He claims that changa has improved his health and life, teaching him how to live a more holistic lifestyle, improving also his eating habits and keeping him away from dangerous addictive behaviors. John endorses the idea that changa heals through spiritual alignment. He claims that changa works by balancing his chakras, leaving him feeling profoundly centered – an experience unlike those gained through any other entheogen. He uses the mixture in a ritualistic way as a mean to elevate his consciousness, to communicate with his inner self and to get back to the core of his life's meaning. Contrarily, Izzy's comments offer a vision of changa's long-term individual transformations as being ambiguous, and even misleading.

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<sup>39</sup> PTSD stands for 'Posttraumatic Stress Disorder'.

I needed to process a trauma and changa gave me a platform for exploration and diversion - a world that does not seem as constrained as daily life. It gave me a lucid dream for as long as I was not ready to face reality in a rational way. I am not sure if I would have been as advanced as I am now without having seen all those things. (Izzy, Interview, December, 2015)

In fact, he reports that dedication to DMT and other psychoactive compounds, such as LSD, supported a process of isolation, as he began living in a world created in his mind, based around “karma, soul, cosmic consciousness—those sorts of things”. Izzy argues that the fact entheogens brought him to a strict vegan diet is a negative thing, claiming “I became an orthorexic<sup>40</sup>, I was obsessed with eating healthy, often 100% raw vegan food”. Izzy’s process of changa transformation resulted in social and personal side effects that, now having some distance from the entheogenic way of life, he perceives as negative. His experience proves that personal interpretation is key when dealing with entheogenic experiences.

Another recurring healing effect experienced by my respondents is described as the ‘integration of fear’, leading to a relief from anxiety. Caio, who describes himself as “a soul from another planet”, grew to understand the true nature of God and spirituality through his use of changa. Believing that there is no death and that “we are all one” he achieved a deep and blissful inner serenity. Ded, who had stopped using psychedelics twenty years before encountering changa, claims that the mixture had substantial healing effects, chiefly a relief from anxiety. The changa vision presented him with a personification of all his fears in the form of a humanoid creature hanging in his living room. After seeing that creature he felt that he had pinpointed something. Looking directly in the eyes of the being, he felt that he had discovered something that had wanted to remain hidden and to harass him secretly.

I tried changa in order to have a light psychedelic experience - to see some colors, like I did when I was a young boy experimenting with LSD and other hallucinogens. Instead this mixture of MAOi and DMT surprised me with its intensity. I actually feel less anxious since I dived into it. With these experiences I got the awareness of being part of something big -

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<sup>40</sup> *Orthorexia nervosa* is a proposed eating disorder characterized by extreme or excessive preoccupation with eating food believed to be healthy (Bratman 2014).



bigger than I thought, bigger than what we call reality. This gives me serenity. I feel better; I also started dreaming again. I was not dreaming anymore; for years I could not remember my dreams. Something has changed in me, something that I do not know, but I am investigating. (Ded, Interview, February, 2016)

Ded believes that the process changa enacted in his life is positive, although sometimes peculiar and overwhelming. I asked him whether this may end up as a religious or spiritual quest, but Ded assured me that he is very far from having any sort of faith— that he has opened his mind to conceiving reality as it is described in movies such as *The Matrix*.

Alex's changa experiences resulted in similar results, although he reached them through a very different interpretive process. Alex had not had many psychedelic experiences prior to changa. During his professional career as a healer he had developed the faculties of mediumship, firmly believing in the 'supernatural' and in its influence on ordinary reality. Still, one of his biggest fears was death. After experiencing a psychedelic 'death and rebirth' during a changa session, Alex understood that death was the origin of all his fears and anxious feelings. The experience reinforced his beliefs on the spiritual nature of our souls, which he describes as eternal and extracorporeal. He is extremely grateful to the mixture and happy to have experienced this inter-dimensional healing.

Now I am even more convinced that it is the spirit that is experiencing matter - a spirit that is part of a big unity, beyond dualism and division. I feel freer, less trapped by judgment. Now that I feel some distance from the fears that were controlling me, I feel bare. It is not easy to feel unprotected, though it is a step to evolution. The integration of fear is the biggest gift I received from changa. (Alex, Interview, March, 2016)

Alex experienced changa only once, however the experience was so intense that he describes changa as "the most powerful healing substance he has ever encountered", particularly compared to any Western medicine. He describes his experience with changa as an initiation ritual, during which he performed an important self-healing, "the most important of all my life".

Changa effects' can be interpreted as a form of therapy and, simultaneously, as an avenue to connect with the spirit world thus increasing awareness and well being. Juniper, believing

that changa and other plant-based 'sacraments' (as she calls them), help her to connect with the divine and find direction in life, states, "every time I have an experience like this, I marvel about the magic of life that's ultimately beyond our understanding". Juniper interprets the 'meaning' of changa as "a bunch of beneficial plant spirits that want to help us understanding and enjoying life". She underlines that in her experience, a ceremonial context is necessary in order to achieve a healing changa experience. A sacred space offers a place where the subject has time to stand still, connect with a higher 'spiritual' self, to reflect and to take time to heal.

Taking psychedelics and changa makes you realize you, as a 'person,' are just a picture you created for yourself, which is not 'true' in any way. For sure it is ever changing and has multiple dimensions. You come to perceive yourself more as an ongoing flow of all these experiences and perceptions. It is a joyful realization; it gives freedom. (Juniper, Interview, January, 2015)

Before her changa experience Juniper's framework was already oriented towards an animistic understanding of reality, in part due to her long relationship with ayahuasca and other psychedelics. She believes that every experience with plant-based psychedelics is a step towards an elevated intuition and individual freedom, each experience being part of a gradual process of alignment with the insights gained from the spiritual plane.

Professor8, praising his twenty years of personal and therapeutic experience with the mixture, reported that he uses changa as a daily practice of meditation, in cycles of six months, obtaining beneficial improvements in his physical and mental health. A consistent number of practitioners in the changa scene, including Professor8, express a faith closely resembling animism. Animistic religious traditions argue that natural objects, animals, and everything else we can experience with our senses has a soul or a spiritual correspondence, which communicates with us when we give it attention (Taylor, 1871). While this religious tradition is typical of ancient populations and indigenous groups, such as South American tribes (where the consumption of ayahuasca is a central religious practice) it is also found within the contemporary Western entheogenic milieu. Spiritual healers and neo-shamans often express animistic faith. Palmer argues that it is actually the spirits of the plants

present in the mixture that heal the subject's body and mind. According to this animistic perspective, every plant has some spiritual characteristics, and the spirit of a plant can communicate with those who use it in order to give help and support, helping to increase awareness and well-being (J. Palmer, Personal Communication, June, 2015).

Within this framework the process of preparing and consuming the changa mixture resembles alchemy, the neo-shaman being a creative alchemist whose task is to search for the proper herbal synergy that can allow communication with the spiritual realm and precipitate a healing ritual. Whether embracing an animistic understanding or not, many of my respondents experienced significant self-transformations with the aid of changa. These transformations influenced their personal health and development, but also how they perceive and interpret the outside world and society. The next section addresses this outward aspect: as the worldview of the subject develops, what actually changes after a changa trip?

## 5.2 Transforming Worldviews

Discussing ayahuasca and 'entheogenic sacraments', Hanegraaff refers to the movie *The Matrix*, comparing the brew to Morpheus' 'red pill', which enables those who swallow it to see the truth hidden behind a world created to conceal. DMT, and psychedelics in general, can be "credited with the capacity to breaking mainstream society's spell of mental domination and restoring us from blind and passive consumers unconsciously manipulated by the system to our original state of free and autonomous spiritual beings" (Hanegraaff, 2011, p. 88). Many of my interviewees had such an experience through their use of changa, although in some cases this process was reported as being due to a collection of psychedelic experiences, and not just DMT containing mixtures<sup>41</sup>. Nevertheless many of my respondents underlined that changa played a central role in their individual process of, as I name it, '*social de-programming*'. This section explores my subjects' descriptions of the

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<sup>41</sup> When compared to LSD or mushrooms, changa is often reported to be 'more intense and more profound' Zeno told me 'it takes you in places that other substances do not, some levels deeper'.

transformation of their views on society and nature after, and related with, their changa experiences.

It is common for those who have experienced a profound psychedelic transformation to claim a new understanding of dominant economic system and socio-political mind-control, and a subsequent refusal of the symbols and values of consumerist society (Hanegraaff, 2011). Fredo explained that after his engagement with psychedelics — specifically mushrooms, changa and ayahuasca — he had to create some distance between himself and the ‘world of Maya’, the world of illusions.

In the past I used to be a very big fan of football, I cared about fashion and I would wear only specific clothing brands. All that was based on faux things and on appearance as an end in itself. Now I cannot identify with or get excited by football team fandom, nor can I project myself into such fake realities. The only social group to which I feel affinity with is the psyconautic community, made up of individuals who have similar beliefs to mine. (Fredo, Interview, November, 2015)

Fredo’s transformation implies an estrangement and a radical critical position towards mainstream society in general. Ded received similar insights from changa experiences: “I am a teacher, so I already had a critical position regarding society; I know all its weaknesses, and changa confirmed to me that everything is based on things that have very little value”. A very young interviewee, 21-year-old Caio, commented: “changa makes me see that people around me are all blind”. Izzy also gained a cynical interpretation of society after his psychedelic experiences with changa and crystal DMT. He remembers that he was so critical that he became introverted, sociopathic and pessimistic. Izzy argues that several changa experiences made him think very lowly of society, the establishment and other fellow human beings. He felt himself to be a superior, more evolved being, when compared to the rest of the ‘sleeping people.’ He blamed people for not waking up, or realizing that they were being manipulated by the media, corporations and politics. “I got caught up in quite a few conspiracy theories, which also tend to give a very unsympathetic view of others”, he explains. Floria declares himself to be very sad about the state of the European society, filled with those who “get drunk regularly and willingly and have no respect for

psychedelics". He claimed that he feels marginalized, because changa is not socially accepted and other people, even his friends, see him as a drug addict. He says that many of his friends have extremely judgmental attitudes towards psychedelic substances, refusing even to give them a try. "They think changa is a harmful substance and do not understand that it could help improve their life", he complains, "while they say so they consume the legal drugs, such as tobacco and alcohol, and get wasted regularly without getting any better as fellow human beings". Partly due to his psychedelic experiences and partly to his natural attitude as a researcher, John has developed a very critical opinion of American society, which he describes as a "tyrannical plutocracy, full of racism, inequality, mad-cap extractions and consumption of resources". However he believes that it has an amazing underground culture and younger generation, and imaginatively hopes that changa could become a political instrument to catalyze a much-needed social transformation. He comments:

If America had its shit together obviously there would be changa everywhere. Donald Trump should smoke changa. (John, Interview, March, 2016)

When asked about the transformation of his worldview, Fed discussed his transformed view of nature. "The feeling of oneness and harmony that changa gave me made me consider nature as a part of us", he asserts, "It is not strictly a physical thing, but if you think that before the Big Bang, all matter in the universe was condensed in an infinitesimally small point, you realize that we are actually one with everything. And that's beautiful and kind of weird at the same time". (Fed, Interview, February, 2016)

This was 'weird at the same time' because experience with changa had also increased his cynical views about society and politicians who are destroying natural landscapes for shallow economic or political reasons. "People are blindfolded by all the crap that television and mainstream media show them", he insists. Fed is very concerned with the future of this planet and our species. Similarly to many other respondents, he has integrated this new worldview into a framework that allows him to be more conscious of social issues, changing his way of living and trying to positively influence friends and acquaintances as initial steps toward social improvement.

A few of my interviewees interpreted their transformed worldviews in a definitively positive way. Juniper, through her experiences with psychedelic plants, believes that everything can be created by one's intention. She aims at a world where money is not the driving force, in which people can live according to their inner rhythm and do what they truly wish—"a world in which we respect mother Earth and live in harmony with her and with each other". She believes that changa could lead to a greater compassion and tolerance in mankind's relationship with nature. Juniper also recognizes that her pre-psychedelic worldview was more immersed in 'the system', taking for granted all that was imposed upon it.

During the years I have been in this process I have questioned many of society's fundamentals and have been developing a more alternative worldview and lifestyle. The urge to really change my lifestyle and become more eco-conscious becomes stronger and stronger over time. (Juniper, Interview, January, 2016)

Giulio has a very confident view of the smoking mixture's social effects. He believes that changa offers a great possibility for raising the people 'vibration'<sup>42</sup> and overcoming destructive and egocentric behaviors promoted by mainstream media and society, "a good way for us to develop an evolved idea of humanity, life and nature". Igman interprets changa's social role as that of a teacher who reveals that most people know very little about our species and reality in general: "changa teaches that we have to love each other, although none of us has idea what is really going on". For Brok, changa revealed that everything is alive and connected on number of levels, thus giving him more insight into how other people function.

From as far back as the late seventies, spokespeople of the global entheogenic milieu<sup>43</sup> were making claims of the type that are echoed in my informants' responses. In particular they lamented the dystopian present and doomed future of humanity, claiming that only through

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<sup>42</sup> For some New-Age and spiritual theories, from a metaphysical perspective, humans are a 'being' composed of several different levels of energy: physical, mental, emotional and spiritual. Each of these levels have a vibrational frequency, which combine to create your overall vibration of being (Heelas, 2012).

<sup>43</sup> As already mentioned before, when I refer to entheogenic milieu, I make reference to the 'psychedelic community' (See Davis, 2000).

the conscious mass use of psychedelic compounds might we be saved (McKenna, 1993; DeKorne, 1994).

There is now such a desperate need for humanity to improve its navigational skills on the ocean of life that any aid, which can hasten the process, should be entertained. Consciousness-altering drugs may be drastic measures, but what could be more drastic than the problems now engulfing the planet? Physicians seldom hesitate to prescribe medicines for sickness of the body. Why then, should we not prescribe medicines for sickness of the soul, especially when our very survival is at stake? (Moore, 1978, p. 53)

These claims clearly resemble the position of the majority of my interviewees, although Izzy's account serves to show that extreme criticism, can in some cases translate to social paranoia. Once again we see that, when it comes to entheogenics, interpretation constructs reality. However, the general beliefs of my respondents, mirroring those of the psychonautic community in general, are that the conscious use of changa might play a central role in human collective evolution. The mixture is neither invasive to consume nor addictive, the effects are very short lasting, and yet boasts an extremely powerful visionary and psychological effect, sufficient to reshape many users' whole perspective. In the context of larger social evolution, changa is seen as the tool through which two main goals could be accomplished: firstly, it would introduce desirable levels of suspicion and uncertainty directed towards mainstream media and culture; secondly, it would contribute to the re-enchantment of daily life, enhancing the belief that there is something more than what can be perceived with our five senses.

### **5.3 Re-enchanting Reality**

Throughout my interviews I noticed another intriguing transformative effect of changa; subsequent to their visionary experiences, many of my interviewees began to dramatically reinterpret their approach to the supernatural. 'Supernatural' is a Latin word that literally means 'being above nature'. The realm of the supernatural popularly includes all those

phenomena that cannot be explained by natural causes (Saler, 1977). The word first appeared during the 15<sup>th</sup> century, and was used to refer to natural phenomena, such as thunder and tornados, that had no rational explanation, meaning that when philosopher Elbert Hubbard asserted that “the supernatural is the natural not yet understood” (1907), he was in fact correct. Nowadays, supernatural is often used as a synonym for the paranormal in popular culture, referring to all those things that are not explicable within a scientific paradigm—particularly the realms of magic, spirituality<sup>44</sup> and the occult. It is with this definition that my interviewees use the term, and I have therefore used it within my analysis.

Those of my respondents accustomed to negotiating metaphysical concerns reported that their beliefs in the supernatural were reinforced by their changa trips, while those who were skeptical began to open their minds to new interpretations of metaphysical ‘reality’. Ded’s experience fits into the latter classification. Ded defines himself as a skeptic with no faith and no spiritual or supernatural beliefs; however his experience with changa raised questions that his rational mind could not answer. He claims that he now has many doubts about the unknown aspects of the world, stating that at a certain point his vision “became so real I cannot anymore deny [its] existence”. He confessed that he now feels a strong impulse to investigate these mysterious realms through books and documentaries. Similarly Eaton, who met the goddess Kali during a changa session, describes himself as having been “neither religious nor spiritual” for all his life. Since his changa experience he is curious and open to belief in ‘supernatural beings’ claiming that he may “eventually embrace a spiritual faith”.

John explains that his general beliefs could be summed up with the *X-Files*<sup>45</sup> slogan: “There is something out there!”. Changa strongly reinforced his convictions, but he still cannot

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<sup>44</sup> Aside from indicating a detachment from dogmatic and authoritative religious traditions, the term spirituality is also used to suggest an individual attitude in shaping the contents of a faith. As Hanegraaff suggested in reformulating Geertz’s definition of religion, spirituality is ‘any human practice which maintains contact between the everyday world and a more general meta-empirical framework of meaning by way of the individual manipulation of symbolic systems’. (Hanegraaff, 2000, p. 296)

<sup>45</sup> *X-Files* is an American science-fiction television series created by Chris Carter.



identify what exactly it is that he believes to be 'out there' – although he assures me that he is working on this discovery. John explained that changa, and psychedelics in general, have convinced him that in order to re-enchant one's life, a changa trip in the woods is the easiest and favorable choice. "Fairy tales are true, the woods are alive with spirits, we are just too old or too rational to see them", he suggests. Brok, who defines himself as "a spiritual person, but not religious", reveals that changa made him realize "that there is a lot we do not understand, like magic for instance". Showing him that everything is alive and connected on a variety of levels, changa amplified his beliefs on the supernatural, which are "hard to deny after a pipe of changa". Paty, a 34-year-old Italian drummer who had been addicted to heroin, but now uses only natural psychoactive substances such as psilocybin and mescaline, suggested vehemently that in his interpretation "smoking changa gives us humans the awareness that we all are multidimensional beings". Aside from enhancing his faith in the existence of other dimensions, changa had been instrumental in curing Paty's addictions. Fed, who in his interview wrote that he does not believe in gods or entities, had revelations through changa that introduced a strong element of uncertainty into his prior opinions. Since his experience he has become sure that "changa is a key to realms that look alien to us but are as real as the air we are breathing right now". He confessed that he hopes to find answers to his problematic new uncertainties by reading *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* (1993), a popular text in the psychonautic community.

Igman has no doubts that the supernatural realms, by which he means parallel dimensions inhabited by spirits, are real. He believes that through his ritual use of changa he has found the gateway to these parallel worlds: "I do exorcisms and clean houses from unwanted entities... I have a pretty friendly and close relationship with the supernatural". He explains that "the medicine", changa, "is there to help humans lift the veil to a hidden world that is actually around us all the time. We just do not see it". Juniper claims that she had spoken with gods since she was a child, before realizing that she could talk with all forms of life. She believes that that which we call supernatural is actually part of the natural world. Changa strengthened her convictions.

Changa assured me and thereby enforced my already existing beliefs. But it also helped me to remember, to get back in touch with this deep core of inner knowing. It helped me realize

where in myself this knowledge lies, and that I can access this knowing at all times, as I tend to forget as well. (Juniper, Interview, January, 2016)

Izzy's story was unique within my research, lying at odds with the others in my group of respondents. During the period in which he used psychedelics, chiefly DMT-mixtures, Izzy was entirely convinced of the existence of other dimensions and metaphysical realities. However he lost his faith after ending his relationship with entheogens. Now he believes "only in what science can explain and in what Wikipedia says". It is not pertinent to this research to divulge all the details of Izzy's life history, but it is interesting to note that he claims that when he consumed changa six years ago he experienced a boost in his interest in spirituality. Specifically, changa influenced his belief in the existence of souls and the power of karma – although at the time of our final interview, a few months ago, he presented these beliefs as being ridiculous and naive. This radical change of heart was precipitated by a number of shocking psychedelic episodes and by an addictive relationship with psychoactives, which in turn resulted in dramatic social alienation.

With the exception of Izzy's story, my respondents all reported long-lasting and significant changes in their interpretation of reality after their changa experience – even in those who only had a short-lived relationship with the mixture. It appears that changa has the potential to instill metaphysical doubt into even the most skeptical of minds. Many of those who have used the mixture become convinced that the supernatural is just part of the natural world, echoing the position of Edgar Mitchell, the Apollo 14 astronaut, who once claimed "there are no natural or supernatural phenomena, only very large gaps in our knowledge of what is natural" (in Taylor, 2010, p. 95). My research thus suggests that changa can play a central role in transforming or confirming a user's understanding of the supernatural. The transformations of consciousness that are stimulated by changa alter a user's perceptions of reality and often re-enchant their worldview on long-term; many users come to believe that the world is inhabited by spiritual beings and intra-dimensional creatures. Habitual use of changa is reported to leave users with enhanced sensory abilities, enabling them to investigate realms that cannot normally be experienced with our five senses, the realms of fantasy, the supernatural, and the paranormal. Professor8 reports to have gained such an ability, claiming that smoking changa allows him to contact and exchange information with

members of the Egyptian Mystery Schools of a mythical past; as does Igman, who claims to have established an ongoing relationship with spiritual beings who guide his choices, talk to him and teach him shamanic practices.

The alternate reality accessed during changa experiences bears little resemblance with everyday consensus reality, and many of the phenomena happening in the 'changa-world', that has clearly many similarities with the DMT-world, are reported consistently by a number of different observers. Attempting to solve the mystery of this alternate reality, researchers have proposed a number of different explanations. The neurobiologist Gallimore argues that 'DMT reality' is the consequence of a cooperative effort of 'building alien worlds' (2013). The cognitive philosopher Metzinger also explains the appearance of alternate worlds in terms of brain activity: he claims that the brain can construct a model of a world, possessing space and time qualities, and in which it can interact with objects with specific stable properties<sup>46</sup> (2005).

These theories fall into the paradigm of 'physicalism' (Smart, 1959), according to which it is only the physical world, regulated by the laws of physics and observable units that is 'real' and has meaning. Such a worldview is deeply at odds with the way that many of my interviewees interpret their extraordinary experiences. A far more coherent, if unconventional, approach has been taken by DMT researcher Peter Meyers, who suggests eight possible, although eccentric, interpretations of the nature of interpersonal encounters within the DMT world. Here I quote the three of these theories that fit best with my respondents' own views on the subject.

VI) The realm to which DMT provides access is the world of the dead. The entities experienced are the souls, or personalities, of the departed, which retain some kind of life and ability to communicate. The realm of dead souls, commonly accepted by cultures and societies other than that of the modern West, is now accessible using DMT.

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<sup>46</sup> This theory is derived from a well-regarded *theory of consciousness* that argues that a human is an organism existing in physical space and possessing a physical brain, composed mainly of neurons, whose activity can be observed and measured (Crick and Cock, 2003).

(VII) The entities experienced are beings from another time who have succeeded in mastering the art of time travel, not in a way which allows materialization but in a way which allows them to communicate with conscious beings such as ourselves.

(VIII) The entities are probes from an extraterrestrial or an extradimensional species, sent out to make contact with organisms such as ourselves who are able to manipulate their nervous systems in a way which allows communication to take place. (Meyer, 1993)

By quoting these hypotheses I do not propose to solve the mysteries of the DMT experience, but to illustrate the panorama of influence the 'spirit molecule' has already had upon our culture. Meyer's hypotheses conveniently summarize many of my subjects' interpretations of their experience, and argue convincingly that changa has huge potential as a mode of re-enchantment.

About a decade ago, Partridge has already described 'The Re-Enchantment of the West' as a multifaceted cultural phenomenon, in which a central role is played by psychedelics and related subcultures. By 're-enchantment' Partridge means the variety of ways by which a growing number of Westerners are 'discovering and articulating spiritual meanings in their lives' (Partridge, 2005, p. 11), although this process is detached from any univocal spiritual core or monolithic established religion. My research clearly suggests that the use of changa can promote a re-enchanted lifestyle, giving users newer and tangible insights into what it is popularly called the *supernatural*.

#### **5.4 Transformative Qualities**

Analyzing data, I discovered a number of recurrent patterns of influence attributed to changa, which I here call transformative qualities. Exploring these qualities gives insight into the range of potential transformations that lie within the changa experience.

Often, smoking changa drives the subject on a path of personal evolution, which users often describe as a waking from a life-long sleep. I call this an *awakening quality*. The process of awakening might have both personal and social implications. This is reported to have a

profoundly transformative effect on the everyday habits and the metaphysical convictions of the subject, motivating changes also in lifestyles and spiritual beliefs. Awakening experiences induced by changa are interpreted by their subjects as being central to the subsequent transmutations of their worldviews. These awakening experiences can be catalyzed by the consumption of a variety of psychedelic compounds across a large span of time; equally, they can be induced by a single dose of changa, such as in Eaton's, Zeno's or Fed's cases. An awakening experience confronts the subject with the cultural and metaphysical structures within which they are embedded, and which have often remained little or entirely unexplored before. The awakening experience is usually accompanied by a radical shift in perception. The subject often feels himself to be different from the person he was before, and has an increased awareness of the meaning of life and the nature of reality. Changa's awakening quality resonates with the long-term effects of ayahuasca, another mixture of DMT and MAOi, which is described by Hanegraaff as dissolving the patterns of control imposed upon individuals by mainstream society and media (2011).

After one or more changa experiences, many interviewees reported an improvement in their psychological or physical conditions; thus I believe that another key aspect of changa's transformational power is its *healing quality*. This quality generally manifests on an individual level, as we see in the self-healing experiences of Alex and Ded. In some cases changa users are assisted by a facilitator or psychotherapist, as described in the accounts of Igman and Professor8. During their changa healing sessions they as therapists help the users to ground the experiences, engaging in a cooperative process of interpretation. Some of my respondents acknowledged that talking through their experiences with me, helped the integration of them into their epistemological frameworks, and expressed gratitude to me for helping their articulations. A number of my interviewees reported that during their changa experience they had realized that most of their psychological and physical problems were caused by fear, insecurity and distrust of themselves. Simply by becoming aware of this fact many of these subjects felt much relieved. As a consequence of changa's healing effects, many users experienced an increase in self-esteem. Others became highly critical of mainstream medicine, which they believed was inefficient. Changa seems to be also a powerful tool for the treatment of alcohol and drug addictions, this aspect requiring further investigation.

Another recurrent effect of changa experience is its potential to re-enchant reality in a broad sense. These *re-enchanting qualities* can stimulate a change in subjects perception of the natural world and reality in general, causing them to believe that the world may be inhabited by spirits or other non-human beings. This quality of the changa experience can reinforce a user's beliefs about the supernatural or force them to question their skepticism. Individual re-enchantment has social consequences, particularly within the commodified, materialistic Western framework. It is a process that may induce animistic beliefs, and can cause an individual to develop a more respectful attitude towards the environment and fellow human beings. Within the worldwide entheogenic milieu are several groups dedicated to spiritual healing and quests, who use changa and related mixtures to support contact with 'other realms', or even God.<sup>47</sup> In the psychedelic trance scene, a global music scene with spiritual connotations, changa is often used as an 'entheogenic sacrament' in order to induce numinous experiences (Gaia, 2015). Thanks to the consumption of a vast array of psychedelics, participants in this scene often have an enchanted view of reality. Finally, my research suggests that changa is often seen as possessing the ability to help users find their way in life, as described in Juniper's account. This is, perhaps, changa's most desired effect - *guidance*. A consistent number of interviewees affirm that they use the insights they gained through their changa experiences to get metaphysical and contingent guidance in their everyday lives.

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<sup>47</sup> It has been reported to me by some interviewees engaged in some Santo Daime groups, that some of them introduced changa in their ceremonies to enhance ayahuasca effects (Juniper; Caio).

## 6. Conclusions

My interviewees claimed that changa awakened them from the spell of Western media's mind control, healed them of their psychological and physical issues, relieved them of their addictions, and gave them the ability to communicate with discarnate beings in parallel realities. Changa experiences, and the interpretation of these in an individual or cooperative context, had thus led to significant improvements in their inner and outer lives. The aim of this work has been to explore how changa transforms the consciousness of those who use it. This conclusion will highlight what I feel to be the most significant discoveries of this research.

In Chapter 3 I argued that changa is a cultural phenomenon that developed in the context of DIY psychonaut experimentations. In order to explore the phenomenon closer, I interviewed Julian Palmer, who identifies himself as the inventor of changa. I considered why changa has become, and is still becoming, so popular, arguing that this is because it is one of *the most convenient and practical ways of consuming DMT*. The combination of this drug with MAOi generates a profound, illuminating and pleasurable experience, far preferable to smoking crystal DMT. Changa is less intense and less physically demanding than ingesting *ayahuasca*, which many users are afraid of.

Chapter 4 presented a number of my interviewees' narratives of their changa experiences. Building upon Bruner's assumptions (1986), I argued that the whole stream of experiencing cannot be told; rather, respondents can only articulate 'an experience'. This means that narratives of 'a changa experience' are necessarily interpretations, often created by the subject and the researcher/healer/facilitator in a collaborative effort. These interpretations are influenced by the cultural context in which the user is embedded and at the same time, they are capable to mysteriously transcend individuals' cultural frameworks, unexpectedly opening new gates of exploration. A changa experience can thus be articulated in a huge variety of ways, although I found in my interviewees some recurring interpretive patterns that highlight how 'narrativize' entheogenic visions necessarily shapes personal meanings.

Finally, in chapter 5 I attempted to organize these narratives, focusing on how changa played a transformative role on a user's life. I explored the way that changa helps break down social and cultural conditioning, leaving the subject feeling liberated and healed. I

showed also how changa induces profound self-transformations, and consequently how this can be used as self-healing practice in the context of neoshamanism. A changa experience often induce a process of 're-enchantment' in users' lives, by inducing states and visions that are perceived as 'supernatural', thus causing to profoundly question physicalist and rationalist worldviews. This is an intriguing aspect that deserves further and deeper investigation especially for what concerns changa's role in enhancing spiritual awareness, and consequently eco-conscious and respectful lifestyles. As for other entheogens, changa could be interpreted as an ally of nature and humankind, for it awakens ecological and social awareness.

The potential of psychedelic drugs to act as catalysts to a transformation into *gnosis*, or direct, ongoing awareness of divine reality, even if only in a small number of people, would seem to be of the utmost significance. ... the discovery of psychedelics, in facilitating such experiences and processes, could be regarded as one very important factor in a general spiritual awakening of collective human consciousness (p. 81). ... The knowledge derived from altered states has been, can be, and needs to be applied to the solution of the staggering problems that confront our species (Metzner, 1989: 88).

Changa experiences are capable to offer users a different perspective on what reality is, presenting him or her with an unexpected and extraordinary experience, that she or he does not automatically know how to interpret. By introducing this epistemological uncertainty into the subject's mind, the changa experience demands a sustained interpretive effort in order to become meaningful and acceptable. This effort sometimes requires faith in unverifiable metaphysical assumptions that generates from what consciousness perceives in the alter(n)ate reality that changa presents. Consciousness is obviously not static; it is a constantly evolving process. This process requires each individual (either alone or collaboratively) to select parts of the whole experiencing, placing them in a meaningful pattern, and elaborating on them in order to improve and modify their perception of *reality*.

What, then, is 'reality'? Many users suggest that the visionary world presented by changa (and DMT more generally) *is* reality. Recalling Morpheus' words in *The Matrix* once again, he argues that everyday consensus reality is just "a prison for our mind", while 'true' reality is



hidden beyond our sight. This feeling that a vision is somehow more real than reality is an oft-reported aspect of DMT experience. The experience itself remains a mystery – we do not know whether the DMT world ‘actually’ exists, or is a projection of the mind. Strassman speculates that it is that space created by the ‘Gods’ to communicate with us (2014), Shanon claims it is a total expression of the state of one’s being (2002), and Gallimore believes that it is one of a number of alien worlds (2013). Each user and each researcher embraces the theory they feel fits their own experiences best, or else creates a DMT epistemology of their own.

Reality is undoubtedly relative, dependent on subjective experience and contextual interpretations. Moen (2006) extends this logic to knowledge of the world, being clearly relative, as well. As Morpheus says, “If you’re talking about what you can feel, what you can smell, what you can taste and see, then ‘real’ is simply electrical signals interpreted by your brain”. Empirically changa alternate reality is in fact an interpretation of stimuli the brain receives from the DMT-containing inhaled smoke. It is thus arguable that the visionary changa world, as other psychedelically induced visionary worlds, is just as real as everyday reality, though it lacks the same levels of social consensus.

One may ask whether the transformative effects explored here are strictly inherent to changa (or to any related DMT experience). I believe this is not the case – rather these transformative processes are inherent to consciousness itself, revealing how inter-subjective (and inter-dimensional) articulations of reality can result in meaningful and life-changing interpretations of ‘an extraordinary psychedelic experience’. Although changa experiences are short-lived, the time required for their interpretation and integration is consistently much longer, often representing just the starting point of a new bigger journey. Psychedelic experiences in general are acknowledged as the root of deeper subjective consciousness (r)evolutions.

[P]sychedelic experience provides us direct access to universal archetypal truths that transcend the boundaries of culture and the limitations of spacetime. Psychedelic experience allows us to encounter visionary mystical insights about the human condition, Gaia consciousness, and deep community and cosmic unity. [...] Psychedelic experience is not the culmination of personal growth and transcendence; it is instead the beginning of the

questioning process. Psychedelic experience is the root and ground from which our investigation of the big cosmological picture begins. Psychedelic experiences is the tree from which the fruit of myths and metaphors of consciousness grow. Eliminating psychedelic experience violates the open scientific inquiry of radical empiricism. (Schroll & Rothenberg, 2009: 43).

This work has attempted to introduce the patterns of influence changa can have on cultural and metaphysical individual frameworks, further research is surely needed as to complete my present effort. My qualitative research is only the beginning of academic exploration into this area, which is still vaster and mysterious. For now I argue that there is enough evidence of the fact that changa experiences can reverse patterns of social domination, guide individuals to pursue their higher goals and to eliminate anxiety. It can also reinforce belief and help re-enchant the everyday world. Changa bears many similarities with other entheogens, however I believe changa's transformative qualities and the alchemy of consciousness it propagates, are unique. This alchemical process appears to be magic, for its nature is inexplicable, yet its results are sharp and clear-cut.

Changa's alchemy transforms perceptions radically and quickly, and its *transmutative* effects can be felt across all the mysterious mechanisms of a user's inner consciousness. Changa's alchemy depends from nature as nature depends from our collective consciousness evolution. And who is the alchemist then, if not a mirror of nature itself?

For the alchemist nature was a great book, an open book to be read by putting nature through processes that revealed not only its inner mechanics, but the inner mechanics of the artifex (person performing experiment) - the person working upon the material, in other words, *the alchemist*. (McKenna, 1998)

'Entheogenic alchemists' attempt to understand the outer and inner mysterious worlds through the instruments that nature has given to mankind. In this light, changa is depicted as the latest discovery of a magical creative tool for hyperdimensional explorations, opening a new interesting chapter in the history of psychedelic awareness.

## 7. Appendix

### Interview Schedule

I used the following general outline for semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions. I either sent a these questions in written form, when required by my respondents; or, when possible, undertook oral interviews on Skype or in person. These latter interviews were naturally less structured.

### Questions:

- 1) Could you narrate your experiences with 'alterations of consciousness'?
- 2) Could you describe what happens when you smoke changa, in your own words?
- 3) In which context/setting do you prefer to smoke changa?
- 4) How do you prefer to smoke it (bong, pipe, joints...)?
- 5) What do you usually do when you smoke it?
- 6) What do you often experience when you smoke changa?
- 7) What do you think about these experiences?
- 8) If you had to describe the most significant experience you had with changa, what would you say?
- 9) How do you generally feel about smoking changa?
- 10) Do you usually know the composition of the changa you are smoking? (for instance: which herbs are inside, the % of DMT, the DMT source)
- 11) Do you smoke changa often?
- 12) If yes, how does smoking changa affect your everyday life?
- 13) Would you say that changa improved your health or your life somehow? Explain.

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- 1) How would you describe yourself as a person?
  - 2) Has smoking changa influenced the perception you have of yourself? If yes, please explain how.
  - 3) Has smoking changa influenced the perception you have of the people around you/your friends/your family? If yes, please explain how.

- 4) How would you describe the society in which you live (for instance: culturally/politically/ecologically)?
  - 5) Has smoking changa influenced your views on the society? If yes, please explain how.
  - 6) Has smoking changa influenced your views on nature or environment? If yes, please explain how.
  - 7) Do you have any religious or spiritual belief?
  - 8) Has smoking changa influenced those religious or spiritual beliefs? If yes, please explain how.
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- 1) What does the term 'changa' mean to you? How do you define it?
- 2) How would you compare changa with DMT?
- 3) Would you prefer to smoke changa or crystal DMT? Please explain why.
- 4) How would you compare changa with Ayahuasca?
- 5) Would you report any evident difference in smoking DMT and related compounds based on the plant source (Mimosa Hostilis, Acacia Acuminata, Acacia Obtusifolia ...)?
- 6) Have you ever used changa for therapeutic means? If yes, please explain.
- 7) Have you ever used changa for esoteric means? If yes, please explain.

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