

FIRST INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON AYAHUASCA AMSTERDAM 2002

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Deep in the jungles of the Amazon basin, a vine grows. A large woody vine, it resembles a snake as it twists and undulates toward the sky. It also, some say, resembles the double helix of DNA. Within this vine is a teacher. The teacher's name is "Ayahuasca," a Quichua term meaning "vine of the soul."

The discovery of ayahuasca is lost in the mist of prehistory. Some say it has been used by the indigenous peoples of Peru, Ecuador, Columbia, Brazil and elsewhere for thousands of years. Its use was chronicled by the missionaries who came on the heels of the Spanish conquistadors. In conflict with Catholicism and misunderstood, its use was labeled "diabolical." The shamans were murdered and the Indians forbade its use.

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And so it remained in the shadows of history for the last 400 years. Its secrets were kept by the jungle people who retreated into the forest as "civilization" consumed the trees and gobbled the land.

Scroll forward to 2002, the new millennium, and Amsterdam. Ayahuasca has reemerged, first in its native continent, where it has now married its former opponent, Catholicism, spawning three churches: the Santo Daime, União do Vegetal (UDV), and Barquinia. But it has also emerged across the globe, here in Amsterdam, throughout Europe and the United States. The Psychoactivity III conference, held in Amsterdam November 22-24, 2002, was the first conference designed to bring the international community together and to disseminate the latest information about the

use of ayahuasca, its healing properties, and its spiritual vistas.

About 200 participants and presenters came to Amsterdam from around the world. Eduardo Luna, Ph.D., a professor of anthropology from Helsinki, Finland has a 30 year history with ayahuasca and now conducts neo-shamanic retreats in a beautiful Brazilian sanctuary he has built. From Israel came Benny Shanon, Ph.D., a delightful dumpling of a man brimming with enthusiasm. Benny is a cognitive psychologist, a philosopher, and a professor of psychology at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. He first encountered ayahuasca during a vacation to Brazil in 1991. Amazed by his experience, he began a serious study of the phenomenon culminating in his book *The Antipodes of the Mind: Charting the Phenomenology of the Ayahuasca Experience* (see a review of this book on page 47). Jace Callaway, Ph.D., a neurochemist from Finland, presented on the phytochemistry and neu-

rological effects of ayahuasca. Others speakers included Christian Raetsch, Ph.D., ethnopharmacologist and cognitive anthropologist, author, explorer from Hamburg, Germany with his wife, Claudia Mueller-Ebeling, Ph.D., art historian and ethnologist, Adele Van DerPlas, the Dutch attorney who successfully defended the Santo Daime church in Holland.

And there were the shamans, masters of the ayahuasca experience, to present, first-hand, the ancient rituals. Kajuyali Tsamani, Ph.D., anthropologist and Jaguar Shaman from Columbia; Hilario Chiriap, a Shuar shaman from Ecuador; and Yatra W.M. da Silveira Barbosa, who treats addictions with the help of ayahuasca. These rituals lasted through the night....which made sitting through the conference in the day a challenge.

Kajuyali Tsamani sat in the center of a mandala carefully constructed of differently colored sand. Symbolically, the Sun Jaguar, red lines of energy, was within the center of Pachimama, a deep earthy brown, the four directions spiraling out in gold. This was an ancient design, the design of the cosmos, from the Orinoco tradition. Kajuyali told us the old story of the origins of ayahuasca and of yopo, the sacred snuff. And he sang the old songs, the icaros, of peace and love. A foot-high crystal occupied the circle and a song was sang to call the celestial crystal to bless the conference. It was a magical beginning.

Then Eduardo Luna, Ph.D. described Wasiwaska, the House of the Vine. This is Luna's breathtakingly beautiful retreat center in Brazil. Here he brings groups to do ceremony and deep transpersonal work. Luna is a "neo-shaman," combining the ancient ways and the experience of ayahuasca with modern methods such as Holotropic Breathwork, artistic expression, and eclectic music. The participants maintain a strict diet and observe certain behavioral guidelines as they immerse themselves in the deep journey of the soul. Arno Adelaar was a strong presence as the host of the conference. He also filled in for Hans Bogers, giving a presentation on the safety aspects of Santo Daime and other similar rituals.



Shaman Kajuyali Tsamani, Ph.D., ceremonially opens the Psychoactivity III conference

Hans could not attend the conference due to pressure from the local Santo Daime church which is intent on protecting its legal status.

Christian Raetsch, the one I think of as the wild man of the group, gave an excellent talk about tobacco and its history as a sacred herb, an herb always used in the preparation of ayahuasca. I call Christian a wild man because he will endure any circumstance to obtain ethnopharmacological information. Dr. Raetsch is able to communicate his knowledge beautifully and intelligently. He is the author of over 40 books and many articles on the subject of entheogens and ayahuasca.

One of the most interesting comments about ayahuasca was given by Jace Callaway. Jace is an expert in psychedelic neurochemistry and was one of the researchers, along with Dennis McKenna and Eduardo Luna, who extensively researched members of the União do Vegetal in the '90s. Jace said that he felt now that DMT was not the whole story, perhaps not the main story in ayahuasca. "It is the vine that all the myths are wound around." It is the vine that carries the spirit, he speculated. Some brews have very little DMT, but the *caapi* vine is always the main ingredient. There is still so much to be learned about ayahuasca, he said, the many different forms of *caapi*, the role of each of the additive plants,

how the variance in the metabolites and the potency affect the experience.

Yatra of Friends of the Forest made it clear that she did not agree with the assessment of Jurema as an “ayahuasca analog” but as a brew with a history and tradition that very much parallels ayahuasca. She pointed out that the songs of Jurema were very different than ayahuasca, that the spirits of the plants were very different. Both healers, she felt, but with different personalities, different energies. Her commitment to using Jurema to treat addictions and making the ceremonies friendly to those who need it most is commendable. Those who drank with the Friends of the Forest group during the conference found it a valuable and rewarding experience.

Sharing the role of MC, Claudia Mueller-Ebeling was a very charming and knowledgeable person. She presented on “Synaesthetic Patterns” where colors are heard, sound is felt, music and imagery join in kaleidoscopic flow. This is a process experience during an ayahuasca experience and is found in the patterns of art produced by the indigenous people. Since first hearing Claudia present some years ago I have become increasingly aware of how the inner visions experienced during entheogenic journeys permeate both indigenous and often modern art.

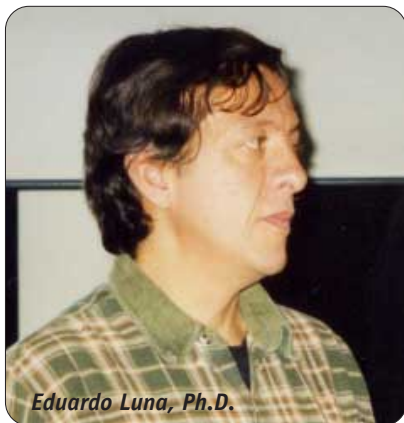
The Shuar shaman, Hilario Chiriap, gave a deeply reverent talk about his apprenticeship and subsequent work with ayahuasca. His relationship with the healing brew spans two decades. He spoke of the wisdom of the plants, of their power to connect one with the earth, with the cosmos, and with the Divine Nature of all living beings. Ayahuasca, he said, could heal anything. During the night he conducted magical ceremony and encouraged each of us to give voice to the

spirit of the vine as we journeyed in its spell. This night I was given my own song to ayahuasca, my own icaro: “Ayahuasca, ayahuasca...Vente me. Ayahuasca, ayahuasca...Vente me. Yo te amo mucha, yo te amo mucha, Espiritu Divine.”

For many of those attending it was a rare opportunity to experience the shamanic ceremonies from three different cultures. Many attendees managed to attend each of the ceremonies and still make their appearance during the lectures in the day—a phenomenal feat. Kujuyali Tsamani, fondly called “William,” led a ceremony marked by gentleness and power. His icaros floated over the participants and guided their journeys. And as the ayahuasca experience mellowed out, he invited members to take yopo, the magical snuff. One man from Germany said the yopo took him in to a space of bliss and cosmic union.

During Don Hilario’s ceremony participants were encouraged to sing and make music as the spirit of the vine came to visit. There was immense energy in the brew and it was no trouble at all to sing and chant throughout the night into dawn. And Yatra’s jurema ceremony was distinctly different also. The cadence and the rhythm of the songs, the visions, and her presence led people into a unique and special experience. For those who participated in the night’s activities, a special “chill room” between the lecture hall and the vendor’s area provided a haven of quietness, an opportunity to rest, and to commune quietly with others. Participants were eager to talk with one another, share experiences, and gain information in animated conversations of many languages. And at night, the hotel hosted psychedelic trance dances for those not immersed in ceremony. There was something for everyone’s taste and style.

After days of learning and nights of powerful experience, the conference ended having expanded the web of connection between the vine and the peoples of Europe and the Americas. ■



Eduardo Luna, Ph.D.