

# The Expanding World Ayahuasca Diaspora

During its expansion from the Amazon jungle to Western societies, ayahuasca use has encountered different legal and cultural responses. Following on from the earlier edited collection, *The Expanding World Ayahuasca Diaspora* continues to explore how certain alternative global religious groups, shamanic tourism industries, and recreational drug milieus grounded in the consumption of the traditionally Amazonian psychoactive drink ayahuasca embody various challenges associated with modern societies.

Each contributor explores the symbolic effects of a “bureaucratization of enchantment” in religious practice and the “sanitizing” of indigenous rituals for tourist markets. Chapters include ethnographic investigations of ritual practice, transnational religious ideology, the politics of healing, and the invention of tradition. Larger questions on the commodification of ayahuasca and the categories of sacred and profane are also addressed.

Exploring classic and contemporary issues in social science and the humanities, this book provides rich material on the burgeoning expansion of ayahuasca use around the globe. As such, it will appeal to students and academics in religious studies, anthropology, sociology, psychology, cultural studies, biology, ecology, law, and conservation.

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# **The Expanding World Ayahuasca Diaspora**

**Appropriation, Integration  
and Legislation**

**Edited by Beatriz Caiuby Labate  
and Clancy Cavnar**

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## Preface

This timely follow up to the first volume of *The World Ayahuasca Diaspora: Reinvention and Controversies* explores ayahuasca in the context of classic and contemporary issues in social sciences and the humanities, providing rich material on the burgeoning expansion of ayahuasca as it situates itself in various circumstances around the globe and reveals its tendency to connect and transform people, beings, networks and ideas. The challenges associated with alternative global religious groups, shamanic tourism industries, and recreational drug milieus, expand to the same degree that the brew itself spreads. In this collection, space is given to discussions on the global intercultural exchange of ayahuasca affecting indigenous modernization, political and moral dimensions of ritual healing, drug policy, religious persecution, public controversies, gender stereotypes, and dilemmas of integration into mainstream society. Ayahuasca's travels from the Amazon jungle to Western societies and back to the jungle has entailed encounters with different legal and cultural contexts; disparate and competing ideas on authenticity have emerged among ayahuasca drinkers and between them and the state, creating an international patchwork of laws and representations regarding ayahuasca, all deserving of detailed explorations, some of which are provided herein. Cultural appropriation and commodification of indigenous traditions are also highly germane as ayahuasca expands into new sectors of society; it is in this arena that some of the most charged discussions may be found. This book tackles these issues and more in an attempt to capture the arguments and proofs of some of the most qualified ongoing research in social sciences regarding the vine. The rapid rise of ayahuasca in the public imagination has created an urgent need for ethnographically sound and unbiased reports and analysis such as we hope is provided here in this second volume. We hope you enjoy reading it!

Beatriz Caiuby Labate and Clancy Cavnar

# Foreword

## **Ayahuasca and its controversies**

Before leaving its first home on the Upper Amazon, ayahuasca had spent a long time mediating between peoples, languages, and cultures, between different shamanic traditions, between the waking world and the world of visions. Between humans and spirits. It was a thread connecting something that no religion, no political power, had yet unified. This mediating power multiplied afterwards, when ayahuasca began to become popularized in urban environments and offered, through its visions, an immediate immersion in what had, until then, appeared insurmountably distant and wild.

The chapter that opens this volume (Labate and Assis) shows how far this embassy has reached: from the forest to the cities and the capitals, to the old and new metropolises, and to other poles of the global panorama. Ayahuasca has already become established throughout Latin America, in the United States, and Western Europe, and, more incipiently, in Eastern Europe, but also in South Africa, Australia, and Japan. As Conrad's chapter reminds us, this expansion is virtually coextensive and coeval with the growth of the Internet, which has played an important role in its diffusion. But although the Internet has been an instrument in the expansion of ayahuasca, it is also perhaps another allegory for it. Amazonian indigenous peoples – who, for decades, have freely compared ayahuasca with cinema and television – surely have no problem extending this analogy to the network of networks.

As with the Internet, this wide-ranging mediation cannot occur without the traversed borders becoming more sensitive and increasingly disputed. This book explores these controversies, and this foreword also addresses them, in dialogue with the rich collection of chapters offered up by the book, albeit without looking to summarize them – nor concur with them on all their points.

One of these controversies is probably the most extensive and decisive of the Western tradition; namely, the separation between culture and nature. Here, we are not talking about archaeology or about outmoded prejudices; this dividing line is one of the foundations of our legal systems, and traces,

for example, the difference between what can be a subject of intellectual property and what cannot, between what is no more than a plant and what constitutes an illegal drug.

These two issues have already given rise to polemics in the world of ayahuasca. Twenty years ago, the patenting of a *Banisteriopsis* plant provoked one of the biggest scandals in biopiracy, while the growing police repression of the trade in the components of ayahuasca has been based, as the article by Hobbs points out, on the degree of alteration through human manipulation. The nature/culture divide is worth exploring, since it succeeds in penalizing actions like drying and packing, or, more effectively, in criminalizing not the plant itself, but the information relating to it, seen as an incentive to drug use. The nature-culture divide is always like a border drawn in the middle of a metropolis: it serves more to create contraband than prevent it, and ayahuasca is a perfect example of this effect. Typically, its followers, like the judges, place it on the side of nature, thereby eclipsing the considerable human action needed for the activity of a set of plants and their combined possibilities to be known by humans.

Another issue concerns the difference between drug and food (Gearin and Labate). Many of the Amazonian uses of ayahuasca are subsumed under a more general framework of a shamanism of food and are conceived more as “purges” or “diets” than as visionary experiences. The alimentary prescriptions and taboos that surround the use of ayahuasca form a continuum with those that govern the local norms of elaborating the body. For Pano peoples, for example, ayahuasca is included in a set of bitter substances, indispensable to the perfecting of the human body, but prejudicial to the beginnings of its formation; that is, for young infants and for women during pregnancy and while feeding. None of this necessarily presumes a contrast with the West, where a growing proportion of the population shows itself obsessed by the ethical implications of foods and their interpretation as either “medicines” or “poisons.” New users of ayahuasca frequently display much more concern with these interactions than the indigenous users for whom, to give one example, ayahuasca is often carefully separated from alcohol, yet is not infrequently taken to be its equivalent. Ayahuasca may form the center of a comprehensive health practice, or of a religious or speculative quest – without clear boundaries demarcating it from recreational use – and this applies indiscriminately to the entire global trajectory traced by ayahuasca.

The contrast between a primitive authenticity and New Age inventions has become of less and less interest. The professionals and amateurs of anthropology have little by little abandoned their belligerence against neo-shamanism. Sustaining a hostile stance had become difficult, since many intermediary forms – here we can think of Santo Daime or the UDV – had already acquired a patina of respect over time. Moreover, the subjects who supposedly represented the purest tradition – indigenous shamans – had been directly involved in openly hybrid ventures. Also, it is worth noting, in passing, the traditionalist prosopopoeia of neo-shamanism, with its

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solemn ritualism and priestly attire, provides an insight into how little the indigenous shamanism of the past was “traditional” itself, as it was characterized by widespread borrowing and experimentation. We can no longer understand ayahuasca as simply an extension of Amazonian shamanism (in itself, a very risky generalization): it already has a field of its own, organized around very different techniques and cosmologies.

However, the fact that the tension between tradition and invention has lost its edge has not prevented the conflict from reappearing now in more pragmatic forms. The encounter between the ayahuasca of native Amazonians and more or less wealthy urbanites produces, after the initial euphoria, tensions that, as usual, tend to have more impact on the financially weaker pole. A local resource has become the object of foreign avidity, and what was a means of dealing with vital conflicts has turned into a way of life. From being a singular subject, often situated at the outer limit of alterity, the shaman has become the archetype of the indigenous person, an archetype that needs to be embodied as decisively as possible, since he or she faces competition from new protagonists, coming from all parts of the world to appropriate this role.

On the other hand, as Echazu and Carew note, the same clients, patients, or users who seek out the forest to escape the Euro-American conventions end up importing demands to regulate and control the use of ayahuasca and the relations between its actors. The moral ambiguity that pervades the original world of ayahuasca – a means of healing, but equally a means of aggression, including as a weapon of war – suddenly becomes caught up in a game in which all these ambiguities are no longer parts of the complexity of being, but elements of the penal code. Globalized ayahuasca has its discontents, just like globalization as a whole.

The case of Taita Orlando Gaitán, related by Caicedo, and his prosecution for sexual abuse provides a clear parable of the many equivocations and conflicts surrounding the globalization of ayahuasca, ranging from the management of indigenous identity to the transformation of the shaman into a businessman straddled between religion and the third sector (the NGOs), passing through the readjustment of shamanic codes to a new clientele, and through the blurred overlapping between the power of a leader and the power of the plant.

The chapters by Cavnar and Mesturini touch, in different ways, on another famous duality, the opposition between the individual and the collective: two aspirations that have both equally sought to drink from “primitive” sources. Ayahuasca originates from a world, Amazonia, that has been presented sometimes as a model of community life, sometimes as an anarchic refuge of personal freedom. Mesturini points to a peculiar virtue of ayahuasca that distances it from both these poles: the virtue of, despite its expansion, remaining entangled, propagating itself through networks, and creating them. The virtue of not transforming simply into a *substance*, into an *active principle*: the question is always ayahuasca and all the relations

that it involves, not DMT. This fact distinguishes ayahuasca from other psychoactives of Amerindian origin that seem more liable to become associated with individual experiences and their auto-referential metaphysic. Cavnar focuses, on the contrary, on the relationship between ayahuasca and the most definitive aspect of individuality today: sexual orientation and identity. For many users from the LGBT scene, the visionary experience – not the social context in which it takes place, for the most part highly orthodox in sexual matters – has played a valuable role in developing a positive perception of a sexual identity challenged by its surroundings.

Cavnar's chapter brings up another interesting dimension: ayahuasca's value in the affirmation of homosexuality contrasts with the use, decades ago, of psychedelic drugs (LSD) in order to try to "cure" it. The relation between psychoactives and gender models seems to be equally ambiguous: the chapters of this volume offer different, and even discordant, opinions on this point. Echazu and Carew criticize the masculine bias that has dominated New Age trends like Peruvian *vegetalismo* and highlight the frequent presence of female shamans in the indigenous world. In contrast, Mesturini observes that the neo-shamanisms have incorporated – unsurprisingly, given the public to which they are directed – a more egalitarian and even feminist conception of gender, including the assimilation of ayahuasca with feminine symbols or archetypes, altering a landscape previously dominated by a masculine ethos. Perhaps these two appraisals are not so incompatible as they first seem: what changes as we shift from one world to another is not so much the gender models but the status attributed to norm and transgression. Women can be shamans in one world, the indigenous world, where spiritual power is a matter of fact, not law. Shamanism is not a priesthood whose efficacy depends on institutional consecration. One can be a shaman despite not taking the usual paths to becoming a shaman: by stealing secrets, for example, or by inventing resources that regular transmission had denied. One can also become a shaman by eluding the male norm. Moreover, such abnormality is not always an impairment to shamanic capacity; in fact, it may heighten it, since the exceptional has powers of which the normal is unaware. In the new situation, women are granted something of this role that previously they seized for themselves, and this points, at the same time, to a kind of liberalization and a species of domestication.

The use of ayahuasca oscillates between a "religion" and being some antithesis of the latter. For a long time, the dualities of this series – religion versus sorcery, magic, superstition, and so on – served to stigmatize any practice not subjected to the frameworks of an institution. But recently, the poles have reversed, and terms like "spirituality" or "holistic therapy" have proven useful to sectors that, having abjured religion and its means, remain interested in what religion proposed as an end. The choice between "religion" and "spirituality" (and related terms) also has other consequences, of course. Depending on time and place, the assimilation of the use of ayahuasca with a religious practice can contribute to its legitimization or the



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complete opposite. In Uruguay, as Scuro shows, ayahuasca has been careful to avoid becoming associated with religion, something undesirable in a country with a strongly secular tradition. Forming part of a religion is, on the contrary, what has helped legitimize ayahuasca in Brazil and the United States: countries with harsh anti-drug policies. The Irish case, presented in the chapter by Watt, is an interesting example because it unites the two poles. For a time, ayahuasca found a safe niche in its identification as a native variant of Catholicism. Santo Daime was none other than the Amazonian version of this alliance between the Christian message and the pre-Christian religious world that centuries earlier had also given rise to an Irish Catholicism impregnated with Celtic remnants. Ayahuasca was thus a new avatar of this deep-rooted community religion of such importance to the Irish national identity. Later, however, the country's growing modernization and the moral crisis caused by the sexual abuse scandals within the Catholic Church wiped out the political value of this association, and it became advisable to defend ayahuasca outside the religious model. The story does not end there, though. The growing repression of the components used in the potion, necessarily imported from South America, has led to the realization of ayahuasca cults – almost without ayahuasca. Centered now on another “root” practice, possession, the religion of Barquinha, in Brazil, had already shown the possibility of combining possession and visionary trance.

The chapter by Goldstein and Labate on the relations between contemporary art and ayahuasca, including the art inspired by the latter, may be the most complex. Just as Eduardo Viveiros de Castro argued in a famous text, that inconstancy was the one true constant of indigenous thought, here we could say that there is nothing more “Western” than contemporary art's passion to abolish all Western norms, dichotomies, and categories, starting with the category of art itself. Enough of contrasting author and public, artwork and everyday object, visual art and theatre, mastery and chance, conventions of beauty and ugliness. Contemporary art strives to overcome these limits, although unfortunately, it fails to show the same determination, or success, in relation to other traditional conditions of the art world; namely, the speculative environment of the market and the dubious world of patronage.

It is in these conditions that indigenous art, or the ayahuasca that served as its inspiration in so many cases, is convoked as an ally. This convocation is ambiguous, since it may be inspired both by the perception of indigenous productions as “art” and by the desire for symbolic demolition to which the new actor is invited to contribute. Of course, the demolition of Western categories is of no more interest to indigenous actors than the categories themselves, making their role somewhat dubious. Artists? Diacritics whose presence serves to enhance the iconoclastic value of an exhibition or performance? Authors or coauthors, duly recognized and remunerated as such? Exotic figurants? The authors note that these experiences of intercultural art frequently explicitly preclude the collaboration of anthropologists in



order to establish a purer relation, free of the colonial and academic vestiges of anthropology; although, this good intention may sometimes result in no more than a new staging of old plays that are always easier to applaud in the absence of critics.

Allow me to conclude with a couple of notes of concern that pervade the chapters of this book. The more somber is the observation that the forces that led to the War on Drugs – one of the most dismal legacies of the twentieth century – has not yet run its course, and, while the legalization or de-penalization of marijuana seems on the verge of acceptance, use of ayahuasca – which, for a long time, benefitted from a legal vacuum – is, little by little, being restricted.

It is worth noting that it is not now a question of a war *on* drugs but a war *between* drugs. The ideal of a life or a body without drugs was always an illusion; the use of drugs is as old as humankind, and strictly speaking, exceeds the limits of our species; but, it becomes completely hypocritical when announced in the middle of a system that makes massive use of psychotropic drugs from childhood. The real debate is not between the substances and their respective dangers, but between the agencies that control them: the subjects themselves, the networks in which they are embedded, the medical-pharmaceutical complex and its legal apparatus. It remains a paradox that public opinion still trusts the latter more than the former. Hobbs's chapter reveals the deafness of legislators to scientific works when it comes to ascertaining the danger posed by a substance: the sensationalist press, stirring up phantasms, has always been much more esteemed as an advisor. Perhaps this is because the fear of drugs, rather than being good for public health, is simply "good for banning," for multiplying draconian laws that the state is incapable of enforcing, but maintains as a reserve of arbitrary power.

Another concern relates to the limitations of multiculturalism. Thirty years ago, when this current of thought became absorbed into legislative frameworks and public policies, it seemed a good way of dealing with the colonial legacy, balancing equality and differences. Thirty years later, everything is governed more than ever by a single criterion from one corner of the planet to the other, and what little remains of cultural difference falls into the hands of an active market of symbolic goods. The contemporary literature on ayahuasca, to which this book adds, conveys the malaise created by this pincer movement, contrasting with the sense of surprise felt years ago when the first steps in an unsuspected diaspora became perceptible. A more amenable vision can only come from this intuition, evident throughout a large part of the book's chapters, that we are dealing with new networks and objects, created from the clashes and equivocations of the colonial encounter, albeit not fated to perpetuate them forever.

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## 9 What ayahuasca wants

### Notes for the study and preservation of an entangled ayahuasca

*Silvia Mesturini Cappel*<sup>1</sup>

Relatedness, agency, and social science: these concepts are the key for understanding the central interrogation of this chapter. Is it possible to think of a social science approach to ayahuasca in which the set of relations that constitute it – that have constituted it through its history up to its contemporary success – is taken as central for understanding both the polemics and the achievements that accompany its internationalization? I mean to answer this challenge through the development of my argument. Both historical and ethnographical perspectives are convoked in order to describe and comprehend ayahuasca as a complex relational space, constantly moving and adapting to evolving contexts.

The first section of the chapter describes how a relational approach to ayahuasca has emerged through long-term immersion within groups of internationally connected ayahuasca practitioners. More precisely, my approach is based on the evolution of 12 years of field research, conducted partly in the Iquitos area of the Peruvian Amazon (2004–2007) and partly among diverse international ayahuasca networks (2007–2017), linked with either the Peruvian or the Brazilian Amazon, and which participate in the organization of collective rituality in Belgium, Spain, and Italy, contributing to a globalized circulation of ayahuasqueros/as apprentices and sympathizers.

Subsequently, the chapter is construed as a progressive description of how specific characteristics of colonial and postcolonial thought and practice have introduced reductionist dynamics within the complex relational space that I've come to consider as constitutive of what ayahuasca is made of. We shall start with the reductionist power of magic and machine and later address religion, mystique, and chemistry. My central hypothesis rests on the possibility for the disentangling processes induced by these reductionist perspectives to be, concurrently, a threat to ayahuasca's way of functioning as well as an occasion for this complex relational space to embrace new modes and networks. Finally, I address the conclusive question regarding the possibility of a relational approach to ayahuasca as an agent.

As far as my perspective is concerned, this text has the ambition to address the internationalization of ayahuasca use from a different point of view than that of shamanic tourism, biopiracy, cultural predation or ontological

colonization. The aim of this chapter is to address ayahuasca as more than a substance and more than a singular entity capable of agency, even if a comprehensive approach to these characteristics is taken into consideration, in order to describe what it takes for foreigners to approach the ayahuasca realm described by local Amazonian ayahuasqueros.

The hypothesis of an “entangled ayahuasca” is the core of my purpose; the possibility of preserved relatedness and of interspecies communication is my theoretical concern and framework. We shall explore different oscillations between the reference to ayahuasca as a singular agent and the description of ayahuasca’s agency as the culmination of a complex and cultivated set of entangled relations that go beyond human borders. Ayahuasca as entanglement is interrogated as a relational space where the power of the plants, of the brew, of the spirits, and of the ayahuasquera, as well as the influence of colonial invasion, Western thought, foreigners’ needs, local resistance, and local collaboration with global issues become inextricable. They are all addressed as part of that relational dwelling that I argue is constitutive of ayahuasca’s consistency and agency. Ayahuasca, described as a space where preservation of entanglement and disentangling forces struggle, appears therefore as a pragmatic catalyzer for local as well as global issues.

### **From the periphery towards the center**

Is ayahuasca an entity? Is it alive? Who is it alive for? These questions emerge from both a synthesis and a memory exercise that have led me to notice that the people I meet today around different forms of ayahuasca rituality have different expectations from those I met 12 years ago. Is this difference due to an evolution of the agenda of “Western” audiences towards ayahuasca rituality, or is it due to my own trajectory and immersion, which has inevitably brought me elsewhere during these 12 years from where I first started? It is extremely difficult to evaluate this difference, maybe even impossible. However, I’ve found it constructive to think of this evolution as a motion that has situated my research in a displacement from the periphery of the ayahuasca “movement” towards its center, from the outskirts of the networks where people, objects, discourses, and practices travel with and because of ayahuasca, into the core of what motivates this circulation and what sustains it.

On the periphery, it was essential to understand a quest that rested on the binary and emblematic division of a Western world and of an indigenous one: the search for authentic indigenous knowledge infused with an “Indian” opposition to “Occidental” modernity (Losonczy & Mesturini Cappel, 2010). Ayahuasca seemed, then, inextricable from the attention given to shamanism in general, and many of the people I met at that time organized their travels in order to experiment with different forms of shamanic practice, with or without the use of psychoactive plants. Shamanism was a way to name a form of spirituality either prior to religion or defying a post-religious modernity. The epistemological frame that characterized

shamanism seekers was clearly evolutionist and culturalist, even if it was meant to value “primitive” thought and practice. The common preoccupation with ecological awareness was formulated in terms of a renewed “contact with nature,” and the main spiritual quest took the shape of a need to find out “if there is something out there,” this “out there” referring to possible existence of “something spiritual,” some kind of “divinity,” some hope for “life after death.”

“Do spirits exist?” “Do we get to see them by drinking ayahuasca?” “Is there hope that life on Earth will be saved from global catastrophe?” “Can shamanism and plant medicine cure me and help me find the answers I have not been able to find elsewhere?” are among the questions most frequently asked by the “Western traveling audience” (Mesturini Cappo, 2015). Ayahuasca as the ultimate healing hope was part of what I have come to name, in my own research itinerary, the “early leitmotiv.” The difference between “drug tourism” and a genuine search for healing and spiritual insight was difficult to state. The participation in retreats rested on extremely ephemeral relations, and sincere experimentation was hard to distinguish from mere curiosity for something radically exotic.

As I have moved towards the center of ayahuasca’s international networks, expectations shifted and what mattered changed. As I started developing a long-term relationship with the ayahuasca milieu, the importance of kinship became more evident. As I became more entangled with some people and some groups, the network started showing its more entangled realities. The sites of my research started drifting from ephemeral encounters with Western audiences seeking shamanistic experience among Indigenous and Mestizo shamans of the Amazon to people, whether Western, Indigenous, or Mestizos, committed long-term to making ayahuasca a living international reality, with the ability to respond to the largest variety of questions and quests. My own research has slowly been committed to the paths and developments of a few ayahuasqueros and a few ayahuasca translators and facilitators who sustain the renewed encounters between international scenes and local particularities. Even though I’ve remained outside the ayahuasca churches,<sup>2</sup> I’ve developed fieldwork with groups that have formed around dissident ritual experts from both the Camino Rojo and the União do Vegetal. On the other hand, one of my oldest ayahuasca friends has more recently introduced me to a small group of Shipibo<sup>3</sup> ayahuasqueras who have been working for several years on both the local and the international scenes. In all these different milieus, I am known and acknowledged, and I am situated within trusted relations. With some people I have become like kin. As I moved into this space of trust and familiarity, I have been able to shift from observing “ayahuasca encounters” to understanding ayahuasca as a “way of life.” The opposition of Western and Indigenous has become obsolete. The ayahuasca sessions I participate in lately are no longer opened by a speech stating that we are about to experience a traditional and sacred indigenous medicine. Ayahuasca is introduced by an informal account of

who cooked it, with which type of vine, which type of chacruna, and which other plants; what is the type of “work” that the brew is likely to inspire, considering the visions the ayahuasqueros themselves have had during the preparation? Whether the ritual experts are Indigenous, Mestizos or Whites loses importance; their repeatedly proved competence and their commitment to their network is what matters. We all either know each other, or we know somebody we trust who told us who to trust. From trusted relation to trusted relation, networks stabilize.

The reference to “shamanism” no longer seems useful: people from ayahuasca circles have developed affinities with other “medicines” such as peyote, huachuma (also called San Pedro), psilocybin, iboga, kambô, or with other medical practices, such as temazcal, while the reference to such a generic term, traditionally used to oppose pre-modern and modern practice, seems to have passed. Does this mean that there is an ayahuasca space where the Occidental and the Indigenous have actually managed, successfully and peacefully, to meet and to converge into a shared space with common signifiers and common practice? The quest for “contact with nature” seems to have mutated into the wish for a “connected becoming,” where the divide between the human, vegetal, and animal realms becomes an actively experimented crossover space.

As we move towards the center, people’s way of relating to ayahuasca tends to take the form of a relationship with a living being. Nobody seems to doubt it, and everybody goes into ceremony for one basic reason: meeting with it – again and again, regularly. Often referred to as female, *she* goes from being a “psychoactive brew” to being a “friend,” a “mother,” a person who talks, teaches, and heals. Not all ayahuasca circles refer to the brew as a person, but may use other ways of acknowledging it a singular entity capable of agency. It can be named “the medicine,” “the cure,” “the plant,” or “the tea.” What these identifications have in common is the agency – an exclusively positive agency – and the singular form of its naming.

The possibility of a kind of “negative” agency, what is commonly referred to as witchcraft, becomes more complex as we immerse into the ayahuasca networks. On one hand, the internationalization of ayahuasca goes together with an elimination of the use of witchcraft, often seen as incompatible with the international quest of ayahuasca as a healing and teaching plant (Ana Gretel Echazú Böschmeier and Carl Kevin Carew present a remarkable critique on this subject in this volume). On the other hand, long-term apprenticeship with ayahuasca opens one to the comprehension that witchcraft may be part of the ayahuasqueros teachings; that the same plants that teach and heal can also harm, and that these two aspects are often inextricable. Whether a good, nurturing, and healing mother or a redoubtable witchcraft companion, the issue we are addressing here focuses on the singular identification of such an intention.

In fact, as we move even further towards the center, ayahuasca’s plurality becomes the core of what its ingestion is all about. Let’s mention here the

plurality of the spirits who populate each single brew: plants, trees, roots, and flower spirits, but also spirits of locations, rivers, mountains, lakes, spirits of animals, as well as spirits of dead ayahuasqueros or of generations of ancestors of a specific ayahuasca tradition, as in the Brazilian ayahuasca churches.

Here lies the paradox that we wish to address throughout this chapter: a paradox between ayahuasca's singularity and its pluralities. This paradox allows for a permanent oscillation between ayahuasca as a singular entity and ayahuasca as the result or the manifestation of a complex and permanently activated entanglement of beings and relationships. Furthermore, we mean to stress that this oscillation between the power of one entity and the richness of a relational network maintained as plural and as extended as possible is at the very core of the preservation of the powers that surround and accompany this substance.

In order to better understand these aspects of ayahuasca that we refer to as emerging from long-term immersion in international ayahuasca networks, we might resume them in two major shifts in perspective. The first one concerns the possibility of entering a relational reality with an entity that is neither human or animal, nor reducible to a religious god, and therefore stands as a radical other. In order to make this first shift, seeing ayahuasca as a singular and positive entity is key.

As we pass from ayahuasca as radical otherness to ayahuasca as "kin," a second shift occurs that works as an opening from a one-to-one relationship to the possibility of participating with ayahuasca as a "way of life"; as a mutual, or even collective, becoming of all the realities that exist in the very entanglement that constitutes it. As ayahuasca becomes a complex space in which people live and get related, we can see that it is not only an active biochemical principle, a plant or a ritual setting, not only shamanic tourism, mass consumption or another intrusion of modernity in the heart of the Amazon, not only an alternative way to learn about the world, not only a remedy, not only a way to cultivate witchcraft in order to damage those who are thought of as damaging, not only the expertise of trained ayahuasqueros and ayahuasqueras of varied origins, not only what links individuals from all parts of the world into new forms of shared experiences, lives, and values, but all of these realities entangled together. In this collective becoming, beyond the divide of the Western and the Indigenous, beyond the divide of "human" and "nature," beyond the comparison of "us" and "them," ayahuasca becomes a complex relational space where usual frontiers are blurred, frontiers that have since long been functioning as basic concepts of the anthropological discipline itself.

So, is ayahuasca alive? What would it mean to answer this question from an anthropological perspective? If we consider relatedness and entanglement as primary preoccupations of a social and contextual approach of ayahuasca, an anthropological perspective on this matter would then have to encompass three major reductionist pitfalls. Firstly, it is common to explain

ayahuasca's possible animation away by restraining it to the "belief debate." Whether alive or not is a matter of belief, and belief is what the Other agrees irrationally with, while We don't. Secondly, personal experience, as profoundly intimate as it is unverifiable, seems to function as a new means of reproducing the old divide between "followers" and "observers." Finally, a scientific approach, based on biochemistry, would defend the existence of something "active" within ayahuasca, but this active part would be reduced to one disentangled biochemical principle.

What we wish to argue in this paper is that an anthropological approach to ayahuasca as capable of agency starts with an ethnographical account of the relational pluralities that constitute it, through and within the entanglements that sustain its power to act and that, in turn, are given support and agency by ayahuasca. As in a circular dynamic of giving and taking – we shall address what makes ayahuasca an agent, as well as what ayahuasca brings into existence.

Ultimately, we shall question what emerges from this entangled reality. By asking what ayahuasca wants, we shall think with ayahuasca's will as a means of interrogating its contemporary internationalization in some way other than as a furthering of colonialization, or as detachment from local Amazonian knowledge and care, or as an attack on its authenticity, its strength, or its indigenusness. Betting on the epistemological opening created by an internationalization envisioned as something happening by ayahuasca's choice – *with* it and not *to* it – allows us to look at the pertinence of ayahuasca's international travels and adaptations as a collective and co-constructed proposition, risky but lively, for a collective becoming (Stengers, 2002).

"We are now facing the wall. It is the end of thinking through perspectives, we must hence populate with concepts that require us to think" (Stengers, 2002, p. 329, my translation).

### **Machine, magic, space of death, and ways of life**

The discourse that accompanies the internationalization of ayahuasca often oscillates between the denunciation of the unfortunate consequences of drug tourism, biopiracy, and cultural appropriation of the Amazonian ways of life, and, alternately, the defense of its broad beneficial effects on mental and physical health (Dobkin de Rios & Rumrill, 2008). The realities of ayahuasca's internationalization seem to situate themselves in the tension existing between an ayahuasca reduced to its psychoactive illegal components and an ayahuasca conceived of as a magic and mysterious remedy.

Yet, this way of speaking and thinking about ayahuasca also carries with it the mix of magic and machine, typical of what Michael Taussig refers to as colonial and imperialistic reality. A reality where "a resurgent animism makes things humans and humans things" (Taussig, 1987, p. 5). With the



explicit intention of participating in a decolonization of the anthropological approach, we shall follow the ethical and philosophical warning that makes the works of Isabelle Stengers, Donna Haraway, and Michael Taussig converge: connected by the effort of not “explaining away” the very object that challenges our thought. In what concerns us more specifically here, it means not explaining ayahuasca away through the usual discourse that invokes, time and time again, either magic or machine. Yet, it is through magic and machine, and the hesitations between the two, that ayahuasca had to tangle during the colonial and then post-colonial times.

In Taussig’s writings, we can see how local indigenous populations of the low Putumayo are transformed into labor machines, rubber extractors, tree bleeders, isolated from their communities; forced into working camps, *reducciones*, where ethnical origins are systematically mixed in order to prevent proximity and connivance. The objects and commodities that accompany the colonial enterprise are meanwhile converted in power beings, capable of creating a relation of dependence and slavery of both the indigenous and the colonial entrepreneurs.

Concurrently, the understanding of local ritual practice – partly feared and partly ridiculed, partly looked at with fascination and partly explained away as magic – is immediately classified in the category of belief: sometimes false belief, sometimes dangerous, evil sorcery. Magic and machine appear as the motors to a systematic explaining away of the tools the indigenous populations gave themselves to inhabit their world, tools that held together what was separate in the eye of the observer, a way of relating to their environment that was in itself a “way of life,” and not just a tool for accessing the sacred.

In the encounter of the colonist and the indigenous – an encounter marked by a lack of comprehension, partly due to cultural blindness, partly by colonial greed – Taussig sees and describes the emergence of a transcultural space of terror; a space of death functioning as “a common pool of key signifiers binding the transforming culture of the conqueror with that of the conquered” (Taussig, 1987, p. 5).

The creation of colonial reality that occurred in the New World will remain a subject of immense curiosity and study – the New World where the Indian and African *irracionales* became compliant to the reason of a small number of white Christians. Whatever the conclusions we draw about how that hegemony was so speedily effected, we would be unwise to overlook the role of terror. And by this I mean to think-through-terror, which as well as being a physiological state is also a social one whose special features allow it to serve as the mediator par excellence of colonial hegemony: the space of death where the Indian, African and White gave birth to a New World.

(Taussig, 1987, p. 5)



When Taussig refers to terror as a mode of thought, he means to activate the reality in which most of the eastern Amazon was drawn into by the development of the Rubber Boom. Today's extractive industry is still functioning on the disentangled reality that emerged from the rubber boom period, as colonial and postcolonial networks reveal the similarity and the continuity of their production of disentanglement.

The actual horror that Taussig describes through the reports of Casement, Hardenburg, and Grey is specific to the Putumayo region, that then-unclear frontier between Colombia and Peru where the *conquistadores* imposed their *derechos de conquistar*: "those tacitly agreed upon conventions outside any state law and supposedly guaranteeing to each 'conqueror' his rights to the labor-product of 'his' Indians" (Taussig, 1987, p. 22). We read in Grey's report, quoted by Taussig, that the number of Indians deliberately killed by starvation, bullet, fire, beheading, or flogging to death for failing to bring in enough rubber, together with those atrociously tortured during the short period of 12 years that allowed for the extraction of 4,000 tons of rubber, cannot have been less than 30,000, and possibly more (Taussig, 1987, p. 20).

But what transcended the specificity of this region is the colonial attitude that imposed as evidence the right to both "farming the forest" and "taking Indians" as "naturally" belonging to the colonist (Taussig, 1987, p. 23). Yet, assassination, rape, torture, and other grotesqueries that took place in the Putumayo are what force Taussig to think of the colonial encounter through terror, as a space of death. Death acquires, in the author's argument, a multi-layered meaning: it starts with the horror of Indians killed for sport (not even for economical reasons and, in many ways, against the very idea of the best economic productivity). It continues with Indians torturing other Indians in order to move one step higher in the precarious hierarchy of rubber trading. It climbs in power through the killings between station managers of the same company for whom murdering another manager was a way to obtain "his" rubber and "his" Indians. And it reaches a paroxysm when, for the very same reason, every rubber baron is afraid of his homologous because no law and no order seems to reach this savage edge of the civilizing front. All this death also implies different ways of taking power over Indian bodies: forced labor associated with the debt-peonage system, concubinage with young Indian women, and forced acquisition of Indian children, often sold as servants in Iquitos (Taussig, 1987, p. 60).

Slavery is the missing key. Death and slavery worked together to transform, savagely and radically, the indigenous way of life. Escaping the colonial reality by going deeper into the forest was an option some groups or individuals – henceforth transformed into survivors – took. But, along the main rivers, a new Amazonian society was being born. Individuals who have been hunted down and caught, who have lost their community, their kin, their homes, their ways of life, were *reduced*, as the name of the new villages indicates so well,<sup>4</sup> to laboring bodies, alienated from their communities, deprived of their kin and their freedom, sold on the market as livestock,

and looked at as commodities. The higher ranks of colonial power seemed to follow these developments with critiques, but without letting morality get in the way.

The plural sense of the space of death construed by Taussig finds a parallel in the intensity of the loss of all those relations that allowed the Indian to live in a meaningful way, in a living environment that he knew how to share with his kin, with his enemies, and with a great number of other related beings: vegetal, animal, human, or spirits alike. The “reduced Indian” no longer inhabits; he survives. Day in day out, he is pushed to transform into a labor machine meanwhile he looks toward the forest for what has been lost. And it is there that Taussig sees the emergence of what both the colonizer and the reduced Indian will interpret as the “magic of the savage” in the coming together of a reciprocating confabulation. From both the fear of the savage and the fascination for the forest wilderness emerges the possibility of magic healing.

Ayahuasca, concurrently to the reduced Indian, comes out of the forest and becomes the magic remedy of the new mestizo way of life, the power of the forest in liquid form, the reminder of what is lost, and yet the means of countering the power of new “savage spirits” within the newly reduced way of life of the colonized Indian. The possibility of recreating entanglement, meaningful relations – whether positive relations based on sharing or negative relations marked by envy and black magic – between people who have to find new ways of becoming together is key to understanding the beginning of a spreading of ayahuasca that will pervade most of the Amazon basin. As argued in previous writings (Losonczy & Mesturini Cappelletti, 2011), this spread of ayahuasca throughout the Amazon, concurrent with its becoming “mestizo,” has functioned as a first major translation, allowing for further spreading both to parts of the new continent as well as to the main cities of the old continent.

### **Religion, mystique, and chemistry, or “is the genie really out of the bottle”?**

This nod to Glenn H. Shepard’s foreword to the previous book, edited by Beatriz Caiuby Labate, Clancy Cavnar and Alex K. Gearin (Labate, Cavnar, & Gearin 2016), stands not only as a homage to that volume, and to Shepard’s synthesis of the most recent evolutions of ayahuasca, but it also allows me to introduce the hypothesis of an “entangled ayahuasca,” implying that the very genius of ayahuasca as a specific form of entanglement would be to know how to keep the genie in, regardless of the number of bottles traveling around. From the forest communities to the *reducciones*, from the *reducciones* to the local towns, then to the bigger cities and, today, into the very heart of the Western cosmopolitan way of life, as well as back to communities who live deep in the forest (Shepard, 2014), ayahuasca has traveled into modernity through different modes of discourse.

The search for strong mystical experience through the consumption of substances known and prepared by ethnic groups living on the outskirts of modern society, and depicted as modernity's "natural" alter egos, has been at the core of the counterculture movement. The ritualized intake of peyote or psilocybin in Mexico and some of the southwestern states of the US has rapidly been reduced to the non-ritualized, only eventually collective intake of the active principles that can be found in these plants and cactus, namely mescaline. We are here situated in what Thompson (quoted by Shepard, 2016) evoked as the crashed wave of the psychedelic revolution, and that Shepard references in order to propose the expansion that ayahuasca has known from the 80's until today as the "second wave" of that very psychedelic revolution that had failed in its first attempt.

Many of those who sought out ayahuasca in the Amazonian rainforests in the 1970s and 1980s were indeed spiritual orphans, in some sense, of this failed revolution that, though inspired by natural psychoactive substances and indigenous medico-religious rituals of the Americas, relied heavily on synthetic substances like LSD and mescaline, often consumed in informal or recreational, rather than ritual, settings.

(Shepard, 2016, foreword)

From this perspective, even if the counter-culture movement had seen in indigenous ritual practice some kind of an answer to a modern spiritual quest for transformation or consciousness expansion, it failed to see the subtlety and necessity of a shared rituality, favoring instead individual psychedelic experiences. As such, the encounter between this kind of ritual practice and the Western audience seems to have often induced a reduced vision of what this rituality entailed in favor of a face-to-face between a "substance" and a "consumer," as it was for one of the ancestors of the Beat Generation, Aldous Huxley, and the mescaline which inspired, or opened, the doors of perception.<sup>5</sup>

Detailing personal experience, putting into words extraordinary visions or revelations that transform one's comprehension of oneself, of others, and of the world, is certainly the main frame in which Westerners have managed to "relate" to such "substances" and to honor their "power." The alliance of the chemical and the mystical perspectives seems to have formed an interpretative matrix that represents a kind of consensus of both detractors and defenders of the psychedelics wave. Looking at these substances as psychoactive components, mechanically modifying individual perception of the world, still participates in the dissembling of these substances' "way of life" and, therefore, still carries the reductive frame of colonial thought.

By pointing this out, we mean to argue that the very fact of interpreting these first encounters with indigenous ritual practice and the plants that took part in them in terms of personal mystical experiences due to psychoactive components has worked as a powerful disentangling process leading

to, or at least participating in, the failure of the first wave. Isolated internal perceptions looking at isolated active chemicals are still far away from the kinship these “plants” used to be part of. As fascinating as those personal experiences may have been, the individual consumer, facing her own personal experience, seems to have failed in her capacity to relate to the actual networks those substances are a part of.

The writings of Aldous Huxley carry both the entanglement of those first encounters and the ingredients for the disentangling processes I mean to point out.

It was in 1886 that the German pharmacologist, Louis Lewin, published the first systematic study of the cactus, to which his own name was subsequently given. *Anhalonium lewinii* was new to science. To primitive religion and the Indians of Mexico and the American Southwest it was a friend of immemorially long standing. Indeed, it was much more than a friend. In the words of one of the early Spanish visitors to the New World, “they eat a root which they call peyote, and which they venerate as though it were a deity.” Why they should have venerated it as a deity became apparent when such eminent psychologists as Jaensch, Havelock Ellis and Weir Mitchell began their experiments with mescaline, the active principle of peyote. True, they stopped short at a point well this side of idolatry; but all concurred in assigning to mescaline a position among drugs of unique distinction.

(Huxley, 1954, p. 5)

Firstly, peyote loses its name before the scientist who gives it his own because he “discovers” it and its active component. The fact that this cactus is a “friend of immemorial times” for the natives appears in his writings, but it is also quickly translated into something more transcendent. What are the relational consequences of Huxley’s translation of a friend of immemorial times into the divine? Can we relate to a divinity as we relate to an old friend? Isn’t the equality between friends lost when the superiority of the divine is evoked? Noting the honor and the respect with which the natives treated their friend, the Western observer couldn’t help translating it into either religious, mystical or chemical terms. Meanwhile, the possibility of symmetrical relationship is as good as lost.

The religious approach saw an evil enemy and fought against it through evangelization. The mystical perspective saw a potential for spiritual development and for alternative medical uses, and therefore reduced this practice to an individualist, interiorized, psychological space. The chemist’s perspective, and its way of reducing profoundly entangled substances to one powerful, and possibly dangerous, component, has opened the way to both legal issues related to the War on Drugs as well as to recreational use that has escaped from the ritual entanglement of community surveillance and of ayahuasqueros’ and ayahuasqueras’ expertise in preparation.

Regardless of the multiple and ongoing efforts of both machine and magic, ayahuasca seems to manage to resist being reduced to either the machinery of its psychoactive elements, to the loneliness of its mystique, or to the mixed power of magic and machine borne by the possibility of psychosomatics. How?

What we mean to argue is that if ayahuasca has been able to assemble the spiritual orphans of the first wave, as well as the humiliated, tortured, and reduced Amazonian Indians, and if, therefore, it has been able to resist the disentangling process that has put seriously at risk the survival of peyote and psilocybin rituality, it's because of its particular capacity of preserving entanglement, of picking up the pieces and sustaining the possibility of relation. So, in which ways is ayahuasca preserving entanglement? Which entanglement?

### **The hypothesis of an entangled ayahuasca, or “what is ayahuasca made of?”**

Unlike peyote and psilocybin, as well as other indigenous vegetal “friends,” such as huachuma or iboga, ayahuasca is not a single plant, nor a single root, vine, or cactus for that matter. It is, as it is well known and documented, a brew that requests at least two basic vegetal ingredients: leaves from the chacruna plant, *Psychotria viridis*, and chunks of the ayahuasca vine, *Banisteriopsis caapi*. From a biochemical perspective, the vine, the part that has given a name to the brew, is an enzyme inhibitor (MAOI) that interferes with the normal breakdown of the DMT in the chacruna, and therefore allows the chacruna to give visions. The ayahuasca brew appears, from the start, as a very intriguing and intricate entanglement. Cooking ayahuasca demands apprenticeship. Fieldwork has confronted me with different ayahuasca recipes, depending on “who” are the other “friends,” “relatives,” and “allies” of the ayahuasquero. Different types of trees, and thus tree barks, aromatic plants, flowers or leaves can be added to the brew in order to cook “the” ayahuasca of each ayahuasquera, and I've come across ayahuasca brewed with up to 14 different components.

These ingredients are plants that the apprentice ayahuasquero or ayahuasquera has “dieted.” They have ingested, each one of them separately, within a process of assisted training with a master ayahuasquero who has helped them meet the plants’ “spirits” through song and vision in order to learn how to communicate with them. Encountering the plants means learning their songs. The plants teach their songs to the ayahuasquera who acquires the ability to call the plants and to put them to work in the ceremonial space or during smaller healing sessions by learning to sing them. Each plant encountered by the ayahuasquera through ingestion and song can then become “familiar” to her; meanwhile, she becomes known among the plants’ “spirits.” The apprentice ayahuasquero will progress in recognizing each plant in vision, their modes of intervention, their likes and dislikes,

and their way of working or of refusing to work, and, through this process, the plants will become his “allies,” “friends,” and “family.” Training with teaching plants means “meeting” them regularly, spending time with them and getting to know them well. It is a relational training. It means negotiating relational ethics and subtleties. It implies learning to meet with radical otherness; and yet, meeting these plants means recognizing them as people.<sup>6</sup> It means finding that very space, or that very song, where the ayahuasquero’s and the plant’s spirit are close enough, similar enough, to actually exchange something, to actually commune and communicate. In a second phase, the ayahuasquera will meet all kinds of other spirits for whom other songs can be sung, thanks to the mediating power of the plants. As Labate, Cavnar, and Gearin well synthesize: ayahuasca is an “ultimate agent of metamorphosis, akin to the greatest tools of any rite of passage, past or present, that reveals and transcends the limits of the human experience to the ‘Other’” (Labate et al., 2016, p. 8).

Ayahuasca is described as the one that introduces the other spirits. It is the one that opens the vision, the one that opens the way: the door and the gatekeeper. It stands as a guardian of those who travel with it. Therefore, if the ayahuasqueros speak of meeting with ayahuasca’s spirit, this is only considered the very beginning of a training that not only involves a plurality of spirits, but that also appears as a relational training, forging the very capacity of the ayahuasquera to relate to as many beings and forms of existence as possible.

Ayahuasca as a brew, therefore, appears as an analogue of the ayahuasquero’s apprenticeship and expertise: it is made of what he had to learn and with the challenges he had to confront in order to gain knowledge, experience, and closeness with all kinds of beings. It is all of this, “made liquid.” Ayahuasca does not “represent” the ayahuasquera’s knowledge, experience, and relations. It is made by it. It is all of this, liquid and drinkable. As one of the ayahuasqueros I’ve worked with explains it:

You are not drinking a plant that allows you to see spirits. You are drinking spirits in a liquid form. Ayahuasca is spirit, millions of spirits, turned into liquid for you to drink. When you drink those spirits you are actually choosing to host them into your body. That’s why you have to diet. You have to prepare a space acceptable enough for them to be in and comfortable enough for them to get to work. That’s why diets can be very strict sometimes. You are actually inviting people into your body and these guys are trees.<sup>7</sup>

The preparation of ayahuasca is a long cooking process, during which the actual boiling of the different plants and then the reducing of the boiled brew into a more concentrated, honey-like texture can take more than one day. During this time, the cooking brew has to be sung to, and the ayahuasquera has to diet for it. The ayahuasqueros’ songs will assure that the plants

spirits are part of the brew and, more specifically, they make sure that they will work following the ayahuasqueros' instructions. So, what is actually put in the brew is, at the same time, the plants and their spirits, depending on the ayahuasquera's call and song and, therefore, the very quality of the ayahuasquera's knowledge, training, and of her relations with all kinds of other spirits. All of these elements are entangled in a brew in which the part of the plants, the part of the ayahuasquero, and the part of the spirits are so interwoven that it is impossible to distinguish one from the other. Let's note that the ayahuasquera can add spirits to the cooking through merely singing, without actually adding material substances to the brew. This allows for apprentices to take care of the cooking process as the *maestra* can add their spiritual charge at the end, or even just before, a ceremony.

Ayahuasca appears with this double identity of being, at the same time, one same entity, *la cura*, *la medicina*, independent of who cooks it, who hosts the ceremony, and who sings to it; yet, I've been introduced to most of the ayahuasqueros and ayahuasqueras I've worked with by somebody telling me "his" or "her" ayahuasca was really good. In this other form of oscillation between unity and plurality, ayahuasca fails to be reduced to either the brew or the ritual expert. "To be one is always to become with many" would add Donna J. Haraway, as in those "cat's cradle games in which those who are to be in the world are constituted in intra- and interaction. The partners do not precede the meeting; species of all kinds, living and not, are consequent on a subject- and object-shaping dance of encounters" (Haraway, 2008, p. 4).

Yet a third component has to be added to this plurality: the participants in the rituals. Each one comes to the ceremony with his or her own agenda, with his or her own "intention." Diet and intention are often described as analogues. Dieting and working on the intention behind the participation in a ceremony is what the participant "puts" in the ritual space. Ayahuasca's answer shall be pertinent and congruent with each one's input – ayahuasca being, as we've just argued, the coming together of the brew, the ayahuasquero's expertise, and all their relationships. Moreover, during the ceremony itself, and thanks to the *mareación*,<sup>8</sup> the participant is required to work with ayahuasca in order to address what needs to be addressed and to attentively respond to what it addresses. As a common saying in the milieu goes: "She meets you halfway." Therefore, participation in ayahuasca rituality cannot be taken lightly. The ayahuasqueras put it to work with their singing, ayahuasca puts the participant to work through the *mareacion*; and yet, this only goes halfway. The participant's contribution is a third and important part, together with the brew and the ayahuasquero, of what ayahuasca does during ritual practice.

Yet, who does what? Who cures? The brew? The songs sung by the ayahuasquero? The participant, through their commitment and concentration? And where do the healing songs come from? From the plants, who intimate



them to the ayahuasquera, or from the singing ayahuasquera who uses them to get the brew to work? So, who puts who to work?

The impossibility of answering any of these questions by referring back to one type of “agent” is at the very core of what interests us here. Partly human, partly vegetal, partly visible, partly invisible, at the same time singular and plural, related to each person individually, and yet made of all the relationships that together bring it into existence; ayahuasca as a relational space is made, at the same time, of the plants, the brew, the ayahuasqueros, all the ritual participants, and all their relations.

To understand ayahuasca as entanglement, participation is key. Participating with ayahuasca means, *becoming with* it and, at the same time, refining the capacity of *relating to* it. In this process of tying knots with ayahuasca, we become entangled with everything and everyone that ayahuasca is tied to (Haraway, 2008). And yet, in this entanglement, what emerges is something not only bigger, but also far livelier and far more intelligent than any of its separate parts; something that holds together, and that, because of the very processes that sweep through it, can provide unexpected answers as a whole (Stengers, 2009).

When species meet, the question of how to inherit histories is pressing, and how to get on together is at stake. Because I become with dogs, I am drawn into the multispecies knots that they are tied into and that they retie by their reciprocal action.

(Haraway, 2008, p. 35)

Through the recent tying of knots consequent to ayahuasca’s expansion, an increasing number of people are confronted with the possibility of inheriting histories; from continent to continent and back to the jungle, across spaces of death, torture, magical healing, wilderness, colonization, savagery, disenchantment, machinery, spiritual loss, and psychedelic waves.

With this entangled heritage, the possibility emerges of taking indigenous discourse seriously, of actually understanding what generations and generations of practice with “entities” like ayahuasca had led them to: friendship, kinship, mutual trust beyond “species” borders, partnership in crime when black magic is at stake, confident exchange of knowledge, secrets, patterns, and songs. Not another way of speaking of the “divine,” not “representations” waiting for a “better” way of being expressed, but actual “inter-species presence” in action and interaction. One presence wielding another presence into existence at the very point in which they touch each other, a point where they become responsible for each other’s histories of participation in world-making. Not the spirits of spiritism, living in their separate spiritual world, but entities whose presence stands for the coevolution of all of those who have participated and participate to their on going life as entanglement.



Within the usual rationalist thinking frame, anthropology seems to hesitate between the possibility of bringing culture down to a universality of some kind and the precaution of treating cultural meanings and practices with such radical relativity that otherness almost becomes synonymous with unintelligibility. Between the impossibility of intercultural translation and the insistence of reducing complexity into universal, and often transcendental, simplifications, what we're arguing for is a relational approach, allowing for interpersonal and interspecies ways of sharing worlds and of making them, of relating with "entities" and keeping them alive.

### Thinking through ayahuasca's will

Thinking through ayahuasca's will has not been attempted as a deductive exercise. Asking what ayahuasca wants has not meant taking for granted that what is happening *to* it in contemporary international as well as local scenes would actually be a demonstration of its will power: something that is actually commonly stated in the international ayahuasca scene. What we've attempted here is to look at how successive challenging scenarios, due to colonization and post-colonization, have both forced the colonizer and the colonizer's children to think differently about ayahuasca, and have forced ayahuasca to function in a way that reveals both a particular struggle for survival and a way of existence based on cultivating relatedness and multiplicity. What ayahuasca wants emerges as both resistance and innovation that, because of the relational layers that constitute it, manages to move beyond previous limits of imagination and action.

From the spaces of terror and death of the colonial reality, ayahuasca has emerged as a figure of resistance facing the progressive loss of the precolonial ways of life. That very moment in time when the colonial fabulation gave birth to the history of the Indian as savage, the wild Indian was loosening his entanglement with not only the forest, but all the beings he was sharing his "wordling" with (Haraway, 2008, pp. 92–93). The "reduced Indian," looking into the forest for the possibility of magic healing powers, tells the story of the loss of the pre-colonial way of life, just as he verily incarnates the very struggle of an urban modernity looking for salvation in an idealized primitive and sylvatic existence.

In this space of great loss, the possibility of the general extinction of the indigenous ways of life is at stake. Which parts of those ways of life might have survived and which not is a difficult question to answer: a question very dear to the anthropological way of problematizing cultural permanence and cultural adaptation. Yet, what we've attempted to address is rather the understanding of the ways of life that have emerged from that space of great loss, with the capacity of recreating entanglement there when it was at risk. Telling the story of ayahuasca's emergence from the forest brings us from the very edge of loss and preservation<sup>9</sup> and into a space where the power of a specific figure<sup>10</sup> of sylvatic entanglement reveals itself by calling upon new

forms of entanglement. This figure of renewed entanglement is what we've described as sometimes singular, sometimes plural ayahuasca: an entity that functions as both a singular intentional being and as a plural space where an increasing number of agents dwell and become together.

Machine, magic, religion, mystique, drugs, and chemistry all can be seen as occasions, full of risk and yet full of potential, for finding new ways of preserving entanglement despite the disentangling and reductionist powers at hand. In these new ways of life, ayahuasca travels the world, speaks an increasing number of languages, experiences different climates, greenhouses, deserts, hides its witchcraft, comes across drugs and drug abuse, explores its own biochemical parts, learns to understand the needs of people coming from afar, and yet participates in the global scene by standing as a symbol or a catalyzer for the Amazonian knowledge of plants and biodiversity; for international valorization of indigenous rights, knowledge and ritual practice; as well as for ecological transition, and for forest and wildlife preservation. Henceforth entangled with these modern, global, and urgent life-and-death matters, as well as with each person's welfare, the opportunity that the entangled ayahuasca seems to offer to those who relate to it, who become with it, the challenge that it proposes, emerges as a personal, social, and global pattern; a figure that could carry a story of entangled endurance as well as the possibility of an interspecies social frame that all beings entangled with it could relate to and choose to become.

## Summarizing

The ambition of this chapter has been to describe the shifts in ethnographical perception and comprehension that occur through long-term immersion in international networks relating to the Amazonian ayahuasqueros who have chosen to participate in the international scene, and to a great variety of new ayahuasqueros and ayahuasca sympathizers with remarkably varied origins and personal histories. The argument rests on the possibility of conceiving of the international scene as being constituted of a peripheral area, as well as by a core or center. The periphery would then be characterized as functioning based on the emblematic encounter of the Indigenous and the Western and on a general quest for spiritual proof, contact with nature, and personal healing. As we move toward the core of the international scene, the possibility of conceiving of ayahuasca as an actual being, alive and capable of agency, and with whom it is possible to interact within an experiment of collective becoming, acquires importance. Concurrently, the place of community and of cultivating trusted relations emerges as what matters most. Ultimately, at the very core, ayahuasca appears, rather than as a singular intentional entity, as a complex entanglement of relations and of ways of relating and of staying related: a space of relational experiment and innovation based on the possibility of communication between people, plants, animals, and spirits.

Between interspecies communication and the intensification of possible relatedness, the ethnographical eye shifts from seeing ayahuasca as a space of encounter to understanding it as a way of life, sometimes found, sometimes lost, other times imagined and invented. Comprehending ayahuasca as a collective way of life has led us back to the historical heritage that ayahuasca carries with it, and that is constitutive of what it has become today, as well as leading us to question the possibility of its agency from an anthropological point of view.

Through the “hypothesis of an entangled ayahuasca” we have argued that what can be found at the core of ayahuasca’s power and intentionality is an impressive plurality of actors and agencies, of plants and people, of personal and global issues, that are constitutive of what is often referred to as a “singular” entity. Furthermore, the preservation of this complex entanglement of beings in constant contextual adaptation and becoming appears, at the same time, as the best defense ayahuasca seems to have as well as the very characteristic that colonial and postcolonial scenarios attack through terror, magic, machine, mystique, and biochemistry.

The heart of our argument focuses on decolonizing our comprehension of ayahuasca and perceiving the ways colonial thought endures through disentangling approaches to this subject that would reduce it to *mere* tourism, or *mere* indigenism, or *mere* individual healing or mysticism, or a *mere* drug, or substance, that can “function” without all those relations that “keep it alive.” The preservation of a “non-reduced” ayahuasca acknowledges the capacity of ayahuasca ritual setting and preparation not only to honor the greatest number of possible relations at hand, but its aptitude to invite and withstand tourism *and* indigenism *and* individual healing and mysticism, as well as drug policies challenges and functionalist biochemical approaches.

## Notes

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- 2 I refer here to the well-known ayahuasca churches that originated in Brazil (Santo Daime, União do Vegetal, and Barquinha), as well as to the Native American Church and *Camino Rojo* (*Fuego Sagrado de Itzachilatlan*) [The Red Road (Sacred Fire of Itzachilatlan)].
- 3 The Shipibo-Conibo is an ethnic group who inhabit the central part of the Peruvian Amazon, on the upper Ucayali River. The Amazonian city of Pucallpa, which has become in the last decade the second most popular destination for ayahuasca tourism after Iquitos, can be regarded as a Shipibo town. More generally, the Shipibo-Conibo have entered the ayahuasca transnational scene as a particularly emblematic ethnic group, representative of ayahuasca’s pre-colonial indigenous practice.
- 4 As previously indicated in this text, those villages of systematically displaced Indians were called *reducciones*, literally “reductions.”
- 5 As Beat Generation ancestors, along with Aldous Huxley’s “The Doors of perception”, we are thinking of Jean Kerouac’s traveling literature, as well as of

- Allen Ginsberg and William S. Burroughs' *The Yajé Letters* – who have played a particularly important role in introducing ayahuasca to their generation.
- 6 The writings of Eduardo Viveiros de Castro and Philippe Descola on perspectivism are my main reference for what we refer to here: a shared and yet shifting notion of interspecies “persona.”
  - 7 This ayahuasquero is a native English speaker, a US citizen who moved to the Peruvian Amazon in order to follow a long-term apprenticeship with a local master ayahuasquero. He was himself named maestro ayahuasquero in 2004 after several years of training. He has then opened a shamanic retreat center for ayahuasca medicine near Iquitos, Peru, together with his maestro, and has worked there with him until recently. His role as both a language and cultural translator between the clients of the center (mostly North Americans and Europeans) and the teachings of his maestro (of Quetcha Lamista origins) has been at the core of previous texts, namely on the performing aspects of ritualized misunderstandings (Losonczy & Mesturini Cappelletti, 2014).
  - 8 Spanish term commonly used to refer to both the physical and mental effects felt after drinking the brew during an ayahuasca ceremony.
  - 9 Thinking with ayahuasca in terms of loss, extinction and preservation – an homologous and parallel thought to that of a space of death and a way of life – has been inspired by the work of Thom Van Dooren and his way of thinking with and through the extinction of five bird species described in his recent book *Flight Ways: Life and Loss at the Edge of Extinction* (2014).
  - 10 The term “figure” is used here in reference to the concept of figure developed by Donna J. Haraway: “For many years I have written from the belly of powerful figures such as cyborg, monkeys and apes, oncomice, and, more recently, dogs. In every case, the figures are at the same time creatures of imagined possibility and creatures of fierce and ordinary reality; the dimensions tangle and require response” (Haraway, 2008, p. 4).

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