

An Energetic Atomic Bomb of Good: A Review of the First Annual Amazonian Shamanism Conference

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At the July 2005 Amazonian Shamanism Conference in Iquitos, Peru, the Eagle and the Condor flew together, fulfilling an ancient prophecy respected by many Native Americans of the western hemisphere. This, anyway, is how some *curanderos* characterized the meeting of healers from North and South America to exchange knowledge and power. Most of the several hundred participants, dominated by European-Americans, came with strong interest in the psychedelic brew ayahuasca, the “vine of the soul” or “vine of the dead,” a foul-tasting, brown liquid made from many plants of the Amazon rainforest, but always including “the vine” (*Banisteriopsis caapi*) and “the leaf” (usually *Psychotria viridis*). Many came in search of healing and visions. Although the Amazonian Shamanism Conference did not have the word “ayahuasca” in the title, the masses were drawn to the conference by the chance to drink the brew in the Amazon and to listen to famous researchers, such as Dr. Dennis McKenna, talk about ayahuasca.

Presentations and Ceremonies

Alan Shoemaker and his wife Mariella de Shoemaker organized the week-long conference by alternating days of conference talks with opportunities to visit a *curandero* for ayahuasca ceremonies. The conference itself was an ambitious project, facilitated with the help of many local Peruvian students who acted as hosts and resources. Indigenous peoples from the Bora, Yagua, Shapibo and other Amazonian tribes sold crafts in an open-air market area where the conference participants browsed between talks in the open-air auditorium. The conference offered dense scientific and artistic presentations given by famous European-American experts and other researchers of ayahuasca. Among them were the well-known anthropologist Luis Eduardo Luna, Ph.D., Clinical Psychology researcher at the California Institute of Integral Studies, John Heuser, French ethnologists Annick Darley, Ph.D. and Frederick Bois-Mariage, Ph.D., and Richard Doyle, Ph.D. professor of rhetoric at University of California-Berkeley.

Dennis McKenna, Ph.D. was a major headliner of the conference, giving the first presentation, “Ayahuasca and Human Destiny” based on his recent article in the latest

edition of the *Journal of Psychoactive Drugs*. That opening talk oriented the audience toward the shared vision of ayahuasca as a tool in developing sustainable culture. “We must learn to become stewards of nature, to nurture nature, so we may learn to nurture ourselves,” explained McKenna. Throughout all of the talks, ayahuasca was collectively regarded, in McKenna’s words, as a “great tool of the culture of life.” Some presentations, such as the one by Dr. Roberto Inchaustegui Gonzales, proclaimed there is evidence that ayahuasca may be able to cure HIV/AIDS and cancer.

The scientists and shamans presented similar anecdotal data on ayahuasca, and the scientists’ presentations appeared to support statements made by some of the *curanderos*. For example, a *curandero* said to a group of participants at the dinner table, “Ayahuasca makes our brain more intelligent and improves circulation.” Later in the conference, Dr. Frank Echenhoffer of the California Institute of Integral Studies presented research on the EEG brain scans of twelve long-time users of ayahuasca (from the Brazilian *Uniao de Vegetal* church) under the influ-

ence of ayahuasca, showing increased neurological complexity during ayahuasca sessions compared to their brain scans while sober.

Participating in the ayahuasca ceremonies was the highlight of nearly everyone’s experience at the conference. It was in these ceremonies that we really had the chance to learn about Amazonian shamanism. About ten *curanderos*

(and only one female shaman, famous *curandera* Norma Paduro) were at the conference, representing Peru, Ecuador, Colombia, and Brazil.

Planning on drinking ayahuasca on maybe one or two nights, I participated in four ceremonies over the week. As a participant in the Santo Daime church, where the rituals are very structured, with uniforms, specific hymns, prayers, and dances, the first ceremony I partook in, at a site in the forest with about thirty other people, struck me as unstructured and touristy. I decided to participate

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in another ceremony in a new environment, at the home of a recommended curandero near the airport in Iquitos, and had such a productive session that I went back to that home for two more ceremonies.

On those three nights, about ten of the conference participants showed up at the humble family house around sunset. When night fell and the curandero's children were

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going to sleep, we sat in plastic chairs or on the concrete floor around the perimeter of the curandero's main living room. The curandero spoke for a while in Spanish about ayahuasca and the healing work, then we drank about a half cup of the most potent, earthy ayahuasca I had ever encountered. The lights went off, and while the curandero

sang icaros in a fusion of languages to facilitate the healing work. About midway through the ceremony, the curandero called each participant up one by one to sit on a wooden table in front of him (which could be quite a feat in the pitch-dark room), where he did personal healing work, speaking with the person, shaking his *shirapas* over the body, and singing specialized icaros. The *gringo* apprentice would come around the room doing energetic healing work, whistling and sucking and blowing tobacco smoke over each person. After about five or six hours, the lights were turned back on and the participants quietly socialized or reflected in the curandero's beautiful, tropical yard.

Diversity, *Dieta*, and Ayahuasca Tourism

From what I witnessed, the healing styles, ethnic backgrounds and lifestyles of the curanderos were diverse but there was significant common ground. A strong example of the diversity in healing practices of contemporary Amazonian shamans was in the case of marijuana use; some curanderos forbid the use of marijuana before, during, and after the ceremonies, whereas a minority do use it to facilitate the healing. One explained, "Marijuana is a teacher plant when used in the right way but it can produce a negative energy when used to escape or for fun. It can make you imbalanced and you think you're well, but no, you become fearful and depressed and even violent, but in the people this happens to, they don't notice. If the person has good discipline, marijuana can be a teacher plant." This also corresponds to the teaching of some Santo Daime leaders.

In discussions regarding *dietas* (purification diets) at the conference, there were lots of variation over when the *dieta* should be taken and what foods and behaviors were taboo, but the avoidance of sugar, salt, and sex was

shared. One curandero explained, "Sex is like electricity, it has positive and negative energies that scare away the spirits...garlic and hot peppers also have this current and are to be avoided." While taboo on garlic and hot peppers did not elicit much protest from the participants, the most frequently protested taboos were those on sex, sugar, salt, alcohol, and caffeine.

The indigenous and *mestizo* ethnicities of the curanderos contrasted with the mostly European-American audience. The explosive interest of European-Americans in the ayahuasca-using shamanistic traditions of South America was not generally seen as cultural appropriation by the curanderos with whom I spoke. Both positive and negative effects of this surge in ayahuasca and shamanistic tourism were expressed by the curanderos, other South Americans, as well as some conference participants. Many participants were uncomfortable with the fact that visitors foreign to the Iquitos area and the Amazon in general spoke on the podium more than the Amazonian shamans themselves.

Indigenous peoples all over the world are losing their cultural ties to and respect of their healing traditions, but at the same time are able to profit economically from such traditional and tribal performances. These performances, while touristy and staged, do encourage the younger generations to reintegrate shamanism into their modern lives; the Peruvian young adults that were assistants at the conference were all intrigued by the interest of European-Americans in ayahuasca and several chose to drink ayahuasca for the first time with some of the conference participants. In that sense, ayahuasca tourism helps to keep the ayahuasca healing arts alive.

On the other hand, in nations where most people must struggle to earn a basic living, ayahuasca tourism also has given rise to a whole slew of essentially fake shamans who do not have the knowledge and/or healing intention in the ceremonies they conduct. In one of the precious moments when one of the shamans had the microphone, Elias Mamallacta, son of another famous curandero, stated, "Ayahuasca is the sacred mother of humanity and that is why we must take care of her. She can't be sold. Many use her as a business. These are not pure, true people." Part of the marketing of ayahuasca ceremonies to foreigners involves appealing to the foreigners' notion of traditional tribal culture. For example, the curandero I worked with over the week wore a baseball cap turned backwards, baggy jeans, and a t-shirt, while others wore feathers, beads, and face paint; those in the exotic garb attracted far more participants than the curandero who did not dress up. A rise in *brujoismo* (competitive sorcery) was also cited as a major problem with the popularization of ayahuasca by resource-laden foreigners. Still, in spite of all of the competition and diversity, a curandero speaking at the conference earned much applause when he said, "If we are not united, they will blow us up. Together, we are an energetic atomic bomb of good."

Science and Spirituality

The Amazonian Shamanism conference, like the San Francisco Mindstates conference this summer, was a celebration of the bridge between science and spirituality that has been re-evaluated in the West over the past century. A strong example of the dance between scientific and spiritual or intuitive insights about ayahuasca came through John Heuser's presentation, "Internet-Reported Ayahuasca and Analogue." Heuser presented a very scientific, objective study of the trends in symbols arising in ayahuasca visions as reported on www.ayahausca.com, and he was reluctant to venture beyond the objective walls of science to express his subjective/personal observation when asked if there exist similarities between entities reported in the study and traditional South American entities reported outside the study. He did answer the question, at the audience's encouragement; it was, as many there with personal experience felt, a resounding, "Yes." Not scientific, but true by consensus.

One participant reflected his reaction to the conference talks after an intense night of ayahuasca when he remarked to me in the midst of a long presentation about the neuroscience of DMT, "Ayahuasca laughs at our science." The need for scientific research on ayahuasca was perhaps overshadowed by the emphasis on direct personal experience; ayahuasca was not described as a psychedelic drug as much as it was a plant medicine or plant teacher. As unscientific as it is, the sentiment that the psychoactive properties of plants are beyond scientific explanation was expressed frequently in discussions I heard. By the end of the conference, McKenna said during his concluding presentation about DMT, "Science does not and will not hold all the answers."

This sentiment grew in popularity as the week progressed. When my roommate at the hotel described the extraction of two demons from her back at an ayahuasca

ceremony she participated in the previous night, I wasn't surprised or skeptical at all. A neuroscientist from England, she had come to experience healing of her physical and spiritual self, intentions of which I was aware. I had already heard about the exorcism from other conference participants; there had been about a dozen witnesses to my roommate's apparent possession, manifested by her speaking in rapid Spanish with two male, demonic-sounding voices also coming from her mouth. After the ceremony, she reported that she felt better than she had in years.

For me, ayahuasca is divine medicine from the forest, a very beautiful and valuable gift to humanity in these times. At the first Amazonian Shamanism Conference, I felt at home; many conference participants who came for a variety of reasons related to interest in ayahuasca expressed their experiences as ones of profound healing and growth. The opening words of the conference, spoken by Alan Shoemaker, had been, "They said it couldn't be done!" Yet it was, thanks to the hard work and important vision of Alan Shoemaker, his wife Mariella, their friendly staff, participating curanderos and the hundreds of people interested enough in ayahuasca to travel to Iquitos. It was a deep honor to attend this conference and the ceremonies.

I was delighted by the supportive response from many Peruvian conference participants, some of whom requested information about MAPS in Spanish. A local artist stated that the work of MAPS to culturally reintegrate psychedelics into society is important even in Peru, saying, "Ayahuasca is legal here, but most people think that we who drink ayahuasca are crazy." At the Amazonian Shamanism Conference, I found that MAPS is truly becoming an international organization with a global vision. I traveled back home to the MAPS office in Sarasota, Florida, energized to continue our work of building a culture of life and a world where shamanistic healing practices, such as those witnessed at the Amazonian Shamanism Conference, are legal and available to all.

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