

Toward Light in the Darkness: A Review of the SheShamans-MagicMamas and 2nd Amazonian Shamanism Conferences

“We are at the beginning of a worldwide spiritual movement: one in which women and men trained in various shamanic traditions insist on their right to openly practice ancient religious rituals as well as complementary and alternative medicine to restore themselves to a healthy balance with the world around them.”

– *Barbara Tedlock, Ph.D., anthropologist and shaman, in THE WOMAN IN THE SHAMAN’S BODY (2005)*

“Healers are the white blood cells of the global body and our white blood cell count is dangerously low.”

– *Carlos, apprentice of Don Juan Tangoa Paima, Peruvian curandero, at the 2nd Amazonian Shamanism Conference*



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I slowly write this article, midwifing it into existence, from an internet cafe off a busy, life-filled street in the Amazonian city of Iquitos, Peru. I am saturated with fresh memories of dozens of presentations by a diverse variety of healers and experts who work with psychedelic medicines, as well as many illuminating discussions with spiritual seekers and scientific investigators. These individuals have been courageous enough in their life-journeys to venture out of the mainstream onto the taboo, yet well-beaten, path of psychedelic healing.

This article is a report on two conferences where I had the honor of representing MAPS during the first two weeks of summer: the SheShamans and Magic-Mamas Conference in Geyserville, California, and the 2nd Amazonian Shamanism Conference in Iquitos, Peru. Both events were intimate, drawing around one hundred participants and a dozen presenters, and because of the strong synchronicity of their messages, this article will review both conferences and situate them within an overview of the history of global shamanistic healing traditions.

The shaman, called by many culturally-specific names including “curandero,” “witch,” and “lightworker,” is, I believe,

the original psychedelic therapist. Most shamans I have met seem to agree that the medicines themselves are the true teachers. Yet, these gifted individuals have administered and facilitated these powerful medicines for millennia, creating safe and sacred spaces to navigate the dark, uncharted territory of spirit and psyche. Fortunately, in spite of thousands of years of persecution, a small number of contemporary shamans and underground psychedelic therapists continue to practice the science and art of shamanistic healing traditions.

A History Shrouded in Darkness

Humans have been using psychedelic medicines, or “plant-spirit medicines,” for at least several millennia, probably longer, often in conjunction with shamanistic healing traditions—widely acknowledged as the common heritage of both religion and medicine. Unfortunately, psychedelic medicines and those who facilitate their administration have been persecuted by political and religious powers for hundreds of years. The witch burnings of the European Inquisition and the colonization of the world by the US and Europe are just two of the series of genocides aimed at discrediting and destroying indigenous cultures that honored and used psychedelic medicines. Still, people in several

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corners of the globe continued to use the medicines, often by adapting to new circumstances and traditions. As western allopathic medicine developed, chemical derivatives synthesized from these plants gained higher trust, prestige and credibility from the legal, profit-driven medical establishment.

Over the past two centuries, the industrial revolution and process of colonization has accelerated the pace of the destruction of our natural environment on Earth and the devaluation of non-western cultures. The new medical establishment did not acknowledge the legitimacy of shamanism or psychedelics, yet many people all over the world continued using psychedelic medicines, quietly. As the international War on Drugs heightened over the past half-century, psychedelic medicines that our ancestors used for healing and spiritual guidance continued to be taboo in mainstream U.S. society as well as in others that have been politically, economically and culturally influenced by the U.S. However, with the relatively recent successes in revitalizing legal scientific research on the healing potential of psychedelic medicines, more and more people are able to envision a global society in which psychedelic medicines are culturally and legally reintegrated, in which psychedelic psychotherapists and other contemporary shamans are respected rather than persecuted, and in which the medicines are affordable, safe and accessible.

SheShamans-MagicMamas

Around eighty women and fifteen male allies gathered at the eclectic Isis Oasis Sanctuary in Geyserville, California for a gathering in celebration of women who work with entheogens. The conference participants came from all over California and even from overseas for three days of presentations and workshops led by Adele Getty, Cynthia Palmer, Karen Vogel, Valerie Corral, Anne Zapf, Sandra Karpetas, Katherine Harrison (former wife of the late Terence McKenna), and Jane Straight. Artistic performances by Lou Montgomery and others provided festive entertainment, healers offered massage and energy work, and artistic wares and crafts were on display. It was remarkable to see so many women passionate and

informed about psychedelic plants and substances, in spite of mainstream society's ban on these powerful medicines. The conference opened and closed with group rituals honoring the spirits of the visionary plants that fuel the group's healing and exploratory work. With nearly all conference participants standing in a circle, arms woven together, with hands clasped to their neighbors' hearts, a strong feeling of unity circulated through the group that was carried beyond the ritual into daily activities. Although participants had a wide variety of spiritual, religious and cultural backgrounds, they appeared enthusiastic and open-minded about the rituals. The closing ritual was facilitated by pagan priestess and witch Macha Nightmare with the help of MAPS volunteers Vanessa Vaudo and Corinna Loomis, an elderly woman named Mickey from Monterey, and myself. A closing spiral dance gave participants the opportunity to gaze into the eyes of each participant, further solidifying the connections formed at the conference. Those connections were the highlight of the gathering.

One common theme of the presentations was that women have been working with psychedelic plants since the beginning of modern human history and were, in many cultures, the first shamans and healers. As elder Cynthia Palmer said in her presentation, "If we look at women priestesses and healers of prehistory, they all worked with psychoactive plants, they were all gardeners, and they knew if you ate, smoked or drank certain plants, you would get in touch with the divine. We have to get at the root of why we behave the way we do, and plant medicines are the great tool to do that." Another common theme was the shared love and respect for psychedelics as healers and teachers with their own intelligence. As Katherine Harrison explained, "Plants and mushrooms are as eager for relationships with us as we are for them."

Conference producer Diane Darling advertised the event as a benefit for the Womens Entheogen Fund (WEF), a fund managed by MAPS to offer resources for exceptional women who help in a variety of different ways to foster the cultural re-integration of psychedelic experiences.

Although there was a successful silent auction that raised about \$1,000 for the WEF and SheShamans contributed another \$1,000, the WEF donated \$1,300 towards the event and thus realized only \$700 from SheShamans. All of the conference participants that I spoke with expressed a desire for a gathering of wise women to become an annual event and also expressed interest in forming smaller groups that meet regularly to continue generating the supportive environment for women to do their work. The urgent need for a real fundraiser for the WEF came to light based on numerous projects envisioned by presenters and participants. In spite of the legal and socio-economic hurdles faced by women, “the forces are too profound, the need is too profound to disappear. We need to be strong, wise and prolific in what we do,” said conference presenter Karen Vogel.

Hopefully, in the future, events such as SheShamans-MagicMamas that empower women who work with psychedelics will continue to be held, in addition to new events that convey a clear, active intention to culturally and legally reintegrate psychedelic medicines into society.

“The peyote spirit walk is frequently like a night of hell for a morning of heaven,” explained Anne Zapf, spiritual counselor at the Peyote Way Church in Arizona. Likewise, psychedelic healing work is not all fun and games. While it is important and great for women to gather together in celebration of our steadfast call to work with psychedelics, there is much hard work to be done for the protection and survival of the sacred, ancient science of healing work with psychedelics, especially by women, perhaps the original shamans.

2nd Amazonian Shamanism Conference

To help facilitate this conference, MAPS served as a fiscal agent, processing credit card orders on behalf of conference organizer Soga del Alma. In exchange, Soga del Alma offered MAPS a free registration for the conference, where I gave a presentation about MAPS and ran a MAPS information table.

In contrast to the conference that happened the preceding week in California, the 2nd Amazonian Shamanism Conference was dominated by male

healers and presenters. Of the eight *curanderos* represented at the conference, only one was a *curandera*, a female shaman. When I asked conference organizer Alan Shoemaker about this, he noted that the common South American taboo against the use of ayahuasca by menstruating women, and the cumbersome responsibilities of raising a large family from an early age dissuade many women from undergoing the demanding training necessary to become a *curandera*. The other nations represented at the conference (Australia, New Zealand, Canada, England, Holland, Sweden, Lapland, Lithuania, France, Mexico, the United States) apparently are also not immune to cultural traditions that prevent women from pursuing psychedelic healing research and work. The only two female presenters on the schedule were myself and Paula C.M. Harbrink Numan, the apprentice of *curandera* Norma Paduro and Vice President of Estrella Ayahuasca. Still, in terms of participants, the conference was quite balanced between men and women, and the conference obviously could not have happened without translator Yasmeen Grant, the friendly Peruvian staff of young women and men, and Mariella, Alan Shoemaker’s wife.

This year’s conference was smaller than last year, but greatly improved because ample time was allotted for *curanderos* to give their own presentations. Since the majority of conference participants came to Peru to attend the conference with the intention of participating in one or more ayahuasca ceremonies with one or more *curanderos*, being able to listen to each *curandero*’s philosophy was an appropriate balance to the presentations by European and American researchers, scientists and notables such as Dennis McKenna, Frank Echenhoffer, Benny Shanon, Richard Grossman, and Peter Gorman. While all of the presenters made significant contributions to the eclectic discussion of ayahuasca and Amazonian shamanism, the *curanderos* were better able to explain the crucial role that the *curandero* plays in shamanic healing.

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and emotions,” said Peruvian curandero Don Juan Tangoa Paima. In contrast to the western investment in the power of the ayahuasca medicine itself, it became clear that the power, skill, and intention of the curandero play a crucial role in the healing and visionary work that takes place in a ceremony. “A curandero is neither guru nor sage but an individual you can trust going on the path of an ayahuasca session. Ayahuasca is the teacher itself,” stated Benny Shanon in his presentation. Without the curandero, he emphasized, that path could lead to dark dead-ends.

After six afternoons and evenings filled with presentations containing an enormous variety of often contradictory information, it is obvious that humanity is only beginning to comprehend the powerful nature of ayahuasca as a medicine and therapeutic tool. One curandero, Guillermo Arevalo, stated, “Right now in the Amazon, we can’t say that there’s any pure tradition. It’s mixed. Even the indigenous are fusing together different cultural beliefs. This is not a bad thing, it’s natural. When it comes out of positive intention, it’s good. When one learns to balance out these different types of knowledge, it’s good.”

Because of this “mixing,” there was a lot of confusion about some of the basic aspects of Amazonian shamanism, such as the diet followed before, after, or on a continuous basis while working with ayahuasca. For example, most of the curanderos agreed that the diet includes abstaining from salt, sugar, spices, and sex, but Norma Paduro clearly stated (to the vocal delight of some of the conference participants) that sex is acceptable during the diet. Conference participants with little experience or previous educational work with ayahuasca and Amazonian shamanism expressed frustration about not knowing which curandero’s diet to follow. Such multivocality in concepts as important as diet could be dangerous for those without close guidance. One curandero stated, “To receive knowledge from ayahuasca, you must be cleansed little by little, the way one cleans a computer of a virus.” Not only can a person fail to have a powerful experience with ayahuasca because of disregard or confusion about diet, it is also possible that

the person’s health could be harmed by drinking ayahuasca without proper guidance. Like last year’s conference, participants exhibited a strong display of faith in the mysterious operations of the universe, and the complementary recognition that science has thus far contributed very little to understanding the healing and visionary power of psychedelics and shamanism. “There are plants very sacred, very capable of doing things that science says are impossible,” said Elias Mamallacta, an Ecuadorian curandero.

Many conference participants instead chose to pursue a mystical understanding of what ayahuasca is and how *curanderismo* works through direct experience. Some had powerful, life-changing experiences in which they were blessed with powerful visions and messages, while other people became violently ill, purging negative energies and toxins from their bodies, while still others perceived very little during the ayahuasca ceremonies.

“Some people consider ayahuasca a hallucinogen or drug but for me, it’s a medicine that cures mind, body and spirit. I had friends who drank and were disappointed because they didn’t receive the visions of DMT. They did not appreciate the healing that comes with ayahuasca,” said Percy Garcia, Peruvian curandero, describing the Western focus on seeing visions. The curanderos collectively agreed that ayahuasca uniquely tailors its effects to each individual through a spiritual intelligence that operates outside of the scientific understanding of chemical processes.

According to Don Juan Tangoa Paima, “A lot of foreigners talk about curanderismo without knowing what it really is. They think it’s just drinking ayahuasca. I see a lot of people drinking ayahuasca without recognizing the spirituality of the medicine.” Many scientists, Benny Shanon in particular, expressed doubt as to the existence of spirits and the spirit realm, but most conference participants I talked to acknowledged having personal experiences that confirm the existence of spirits. Dennis McKenna stated in his presentation, “Spiritual evolution is something we need a lot of. Spiritual experience is difficult to quantify even though many of us are coming from a scientific perspective. Drugs have souls, chemicals have souls,

even if synthesized in a lab. Don't dis the chemicals. Everything has spirit."

A concept that united the conference participants, diverse as we were in our thoughts and feelings about ayahuasca and shamanism, was that the medicine can be a valuable tool in human survival and evolution. Applause, laughs and cheers erupted when Peruvian curandera Norma Paduro finished her presentation by saying, "Many blessings to President Bush and I pray that he may one day come to drink ayahuasca...Bush, with all his defects, is one of us, one of our brothers, and I wish him happiness." The lessons imparted by ayahuasca and curanderos were not all taken light-heartedly, though. Visionary filmmaker Jan Kounen eloquently explained that, "Drinking ayahuasca for fun or just to see visions is like surgeons using heart transplants just for fun. If you don't do it carefully, with the dieta and a good healer, you can touch realms causing difficult psychological situations." In other words, the decision to drink ayahuasca should not be made lightly—one should patiently seek out a good curandera and respect the tradition that she follows. In such work I have seen that divine clarity, healing and light can be found where there was once confusion, illness and darkness.

Toward the Light

Both of the conferences were excellent forums for networking with spiritual seekers, scientific researchers, students, practitioners, and shamanic healers, and a tremendous amount of information was relayed through dozens of comprehensive presentations and countless productive informal discussions. Still, some participants at both gatherings expressed concern about a lack of clear intention and direction. One young woman who attended both conferences lamented, "energies and resources were gathered at both conferences, but how are we going to move forward? We (advocates of shamanistic healing with psychedelic medicines) seem stuck."

As environmental and social problems have grown more dire, and as more people have studied alternatives to western allopathic medicine, more people are turning to the root of all medicine and religion: global shamanistic healing

traditions. The role of MAPS in this revitalization is to generate the scientific data and spread the information that will protect the medicines and shamans from legal persecution. Just as the Inquisition and colonization could not destroy psychedelic medicines and shamanism completely, the U.S. Drug War is failing to accomplish its mission and its end is inevitable. The question is not if psychedelic medicines will ever be legal, but when and how they will become legally accessible. MAPS exists to provide the structure for these medicines to become available in legal, safe and affordable clinics and administered by trained, trustworthy, licensed, and above all, well-intentioned therapists: contemporary shamans.

As more and more folks learn from psychedelic medicines and use them for healing, and as ancient and contemporary shamanistic modalities of healing from all over the world continue to fuse together in a cultural rejuvenation, the re-integration of shamanism and psychedelic medicine is already underway here, now.

In this time of great suffering, social injustice, war, illness, imbalance, spiritual emergency, and environmental degradation, the participants of the SheShamans-MagicMamas and 2nd Amazonian Shamanism Conferences have shown their willingness to assist in the healing and evolution of humanity. There is healing work currently going on and those with courage and vision must work to protect the shamans and underground psychedelic therapists facilitating the work. It is time for those of us who attended the two conferences and all others who are able to use psychedelic medicines under the care and protection of shamans and underground psychedelic therapists to help our brothers and sisters have the same opportunities for healing. It is time for humanity to collectively move out of the dark ages of persecution of shamanism and psychedelic medicines, and toward the light the medicines so mercifully, so patiently, so lovingly offer us when we approach them with respect. •



Courtesy: Jelena Cvetkova