

Ayahuasca and Spirituality: Empirical Research on Experiencing the Divine

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FOR MY RECENTLY COMPLETED dissertation, I empirically examined the relationship between the ceremonial use of ayahuasca and spirituality. Although there are already many ethnographic and anecdotal reports drawing connections between participation in ayahuasca ceremony and enhanced spiritual well-being, I wanted to investigate how these claims held up to widely-accepted behavioral models in the psychology of spirituality.

To best determine the impact of the ceremonial use of ayahuasca, I only studied subjects who were naive to the experience. To identify subjects, I worked with groups in California and Canada who regularly host traditional ayahuasca ceremonies led by Peruvian shamans. Working with participants over a six-month period, beginning just before their first ayahuasca experience, gave me valuable insight into their spiritual lives and the effects of the ceremony in the following months.

The study utilized a mixed design method, using written accounts, interviews and conventional quantitative measures, such as the Peak Experience Profile, the Spiritual Well Being Scale, and the Mysticism Scale. I used these instruments to compare the ayahuasca ceremony groups to a control group that was not taking part in ceremonies.

The control group was not significantly different in demographic characteristics. Additionally, neither the baseline Mysticism Scale score nor the Spiritual Well Being Scale score was significantly different between the control and the experimental group. There was also no difference in baseline scores between the Canada group and the California group taking part in the ayahuasca ceremonies.

The written accounts showed common spiritual themes: 1) the presence of light and geometric patterns; 2) a sense of honor, respect, gratitude and/or awe; 3) a sense of connection; 4) personal reflections and insights; and 5) sacredness, in terms of a higher power or of God.

More than 75% of ceremony participants grew interested in increasing their spiritual practice or starting new practices. I found that individuals who experienced greater and more positive peak experiences also underwent greater and more positive changes in long-term spiritual well-being.

Surprisingly, for the California group, quantitative results showed no significant difference in Mysticism and Spiritual Well-Being scores between the group of people participating in ayahuasca ceremonies and the control group after the ceremony up to one month following the ceremony. However, the Canadian group did have significant changes in spiritual well-being compared to the control group following the ceremony. Numerous variables, such as differences in location, culture, shaman, and ayahuasca brew could have caused some ceremony participants to have increases in spiritual well-being, when others did not. Through the researchers' observations and interviews with participants, there did not seem to be a difference in potency between the two brews. Because this study concentrated on examining the differences between different ayahuasca ceremony participants and a control group, I was unable to focus more deeply on some of the differences that manifested within each group.

Still, this study demonstrates that the ceremonial use of ayahuasca often has a positive effect on participants' spiritual well-being, even after just one ceremony, and particularly when participants have strong, positive peak experiences. Based on the initial findings reported here, it will be valuable to continue investigating the effects of ceremonial use of ayahuasca on spirituality; there's a great deal more to be learned from these rich experiences. I consider this study part of a larger trend toward the re-integration of psychedelics into society, and toward the recognition of the potential of altered states of consciousness to be healthy tools for personal growth and spiritual exploration. •



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