



INVITED SUBMISSION

## *Introduction to the Special Issue: Ayahuasca, Plant-Based Spirituality, and the Future of Amazonia*

---

CHRISTINA CALLICOTT  
*Department of Anthropology, Tropical  
Conservation and Development Program,  
University of Florida,  
c.callicott@ufl.edu*

KEYWORDS: ayahuasca, conservation, entheogens, indigenous culture, Amazonia

The secret is out. Ayahuasca is a household word. Articles about the tea have been featured prominently in the mainstream media for over a decade now, and with recent stories about it on CNN, Fox News, and The Late Show with Stephen Colbert, one wonders if there is any little hamlet left in the United States where at least someone is not planning a trip to Peru. The popular discourse surrounding ayahuasca tends to present it as a panacea that can cure ailments as diverse as depression and diabetes—it can even save the world. The excitement seems undiminished by ayahuasca’s more corporeal aspects nor by the fearsome specters that it can summon. In fact, for many people, the challenge is part of the allure, as crisis is considered a step toward the healing transformation (Fotiou 2012). Even the recent spate of deaths in the

*The papers in this volume were originally solicited for a conference panel entitled “Ayahuasca Shamanism, Plant-Based Spirituality, and the Future of Amazonia,” which took place at a meeting of the International Society for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture, University of Florida, January 14–17, 2016. Videos are available at <https://goo.gl/1X4xEe>, or search YouTube for “ISSRNC 2016 Ayahuasca Panel” to find them. Teodoro Irigaray also gave a longer presentation earlier in the week on the same topic: “The contribution of Ayahuasca in the building of ethical responsibility for the conservation of the Amazon.” Video of that presentation is available at [https://youtu.be/zMQ60sJDx\\_c](https://youtu.be/zMQ60sJDx_c) (and titled “Teodoro Irigaray, Tropilunch, Jan. 12, 2016”).*

context of ayahuasca ceremonies or related activities has not slowed the media attention and has, if anything, fanned the flames of global fascination with this multivalent and ambiguous brew.

It is precisely this courtship with the darkness that leads some scholars to question the perceived safety of ayahuasca. There are a number of well-recognized dangers associated with ayahuasca use. However, for most who recognize these dangers, the problem is not the tea itself but factors external to it: the use of certain antidepressants, a diet high in tryptophan-containing foods, pre-existing psychoses, charlatanism, and tourist naiveté. This framing of risk is useful within the current climate of legitimization for legalization, where religious leaders, activists, and scholars alike are interested in promoting the beneficial effects of ayahuasca and other entheogens, often while downplaying their risks. Anthropologists and indigenous rights advocates also have a stake in legitimization, given the long history of repression, often violent, of indigenous religious practice and of indigenous culture as a whole.

On the other hand, we as scholars and as concerned humans face the unavoidable reality that an increasing number of Westerners are traveling to the Amazon to experience ayahuasca and that some of them are not returning alive. Just as important are the far larger numbers of seekers who return from their journeys with emotional scars, traumatized by their visions or by sexual misconduct, assault, and even rape at the hands of their shaman or his assistant. It takes but a quick search of the online forums to find first-hand reports of some of these life-altering experiences—and yet, with few exceptions (Peluso 2014 for one), these issues do not make the national news or the research agenda. They need to be addressed. It is not enough to write these issues off as tourist naiveté, much less to sweep them under the rug altogether; yet as a researcher who pays close attention to the scholarly discourse on these subjects, that is exactly what I and others have seen.

Two papers in this volume address these issues. Raven Ray, a psychology student at The Citadel in South Carolina, discusses some of the medical and psychological research into ayahuasca and what it has to say about possible risks. She then discusses findings from some of her own research regarding emotional trauma and spiritual disintegration resulting from ayahuasca use, and identifies solutions to this problem, specifically, pre-trip and post-trip psychological care. Ray briefly discusses her new undertaking, the Aftercare Project, a nonprofit that pairs returning seekers with entheogen-aware mental healthcare in the United States.

Addressing the Western fascination with shamanism from a longitudinal perspective, Evgenia Fotiou evaluates the increasing romanticization of shamanism and its accompanying sanitization for international audiences.

She notes the dangers that romanticization poses, not only for Western seekers but also for indigenous peoples themselves. The “noble savage” ideology, she argues, strips them of their history; their constant battles for economic and political sovereignty are forgotten; and their long history of economic domination by and dependence on outsiders creates a power differential between them and their Western visitors, who “fail to make the [historical] association of shamanism with exploitation” (Fotiou, this volume, p. 158). She then goes on to critique those voices within academia and beyond who would stifle discussion of the darker aspects of ayahuasca’s countenance and subvert attempts to creatively address some of these problems.



#### SAVING THE WORLD, ONE CEREMONY AT A TIME

Much of the global popular discourse around ayahuasca extends its healing powers beyond the individual soma and psyche to the collective and the global as well. There are many among us, myself included, who would like to believe that ayahuasca has the potential to transform the human relationship with nonhuman nature and facilitate the healing of social and ecological trauma on a grand scale. Exactly how this will take place, though, is another question.

First, there are very mundane issues to consider. For one thing, how can a transcontinental phenomenon such as the globalization of ayahuasca, with its reliance on overseas air travel, be good for the environment? The carbon footprint of this industry must be substantial and growing. Other basic questions include the depletion of wild populations of ayahuasca, the socioeconomic impacts to small communities from the massive influx of cash, as well as the **diversion of ethnomedical resources from community-based healthcare to the psychedelic tourist industry.** Although some ethnographic reports discuss the latter (Brabec de Mori 2011, 2014; Proctor 2000), to my knowledge there is no systematic study of the socioeconomic and environmental impacts of ayahuasca tourism. Such research would prove very valuable in managing and protecting wild populations of source plants, ameliorating the socio-cultural impacts, and increasing the potential for tourist dollars to do more good than harm.

Furthermore, even if ayahuasca were found to engender a more intimate connection with nonhuman nature, the notion that pro-environment moral or spiritual beliefs necessarily drive environmentally friendly behavior has been problematized by conservation psychologists (Stern 2000; Monroe 2003), whose mission is to understand exactly what is needed to shift the balance of human behavior toward greater environmental stewardship. One thing that they do agree on is that the move from moral conviction to moral behavior is not guaranteed. To the contrary, the belief that moral conviction

leads to moral behavior is an example of a logical fallacy known as “fundamental attribution error” (Stern 2000), defined as “the tendency to overestimate the degree to which an individual’s behavior is determined by his or her abiding personal characteristics, attitudes, or beliefs and, correspondingly, to minimize the influence of the surrounding situation on that behavior (e.g., financial or social pressures)” (VandenBos and American 2007, n.p.). In other words, people’s actions do not always match their beliefs, but the mismatch may be due less to a lack of conviction than to the socio-political infrastructure in which people are embedded. The logic behind this “fundamental attribution error” has long been used to accuse environmentalists of hypocrisy. Furthermore, based on my long-term involvement in the conservation counterculture, I suggest that the focus on individual purity of action and the power of individual choice has stymied efforts to creatively and collectively address systemic issues underlying the environmental crisis.

The disconnect between spiritual beliefs and material practice can be a slap in the face for visitors to the Amazon who have come to believe the myth of the ecological Indian (Mulder and Coppolillo 2005) or who overestimate the essentialized role of the shaman as guardian of the nonhuman realm and manager of interpersonal and human–environment relations (Reichel-Dolmatoff 1976). Sanitation and solid-waste disposal in towns and in villages may be suboptimal or nonexistent, and plastic trash finds its way to street sides, into streams and rivers, and strewn about the grounds of retreat facilities. In the interest of his community, a shaman may lobby for a road into the village to increase access to schools, medical facilities, and the market—despite the deforestation, habitat fragmentation, and biodiversity loss that almost inevitably result from road building in the tropics (Forman and Alexander 1998; Trombulak and Frissell 2000; Suárez et al. 2013; Fraser 2014; Whitworth et al. 2015). Women and children may be mistreated, and psychiatric services for the mentally ill are rare or nonexistent. Unsustainable and illegal domestic and international markets for bushmeat, wildlife, and pelts are thriving, (Maldonado et al. 2009; Suárez et al. 2009; Gastañaga et al. 2011; Daut et al. 2015), and indigenous people may act as both suppliers and patrons of these markets—that jaguar pelt on the wall of the shamanic retreat center did not get there by itself. Clearly, these are all very complex and hotly contested issues—the solution for which has not, apparently, presented itself despite a long history of abundant and collective ayahuasca consumption.

Despite these and other critiques, there are signs that the changing nature and expanding demographic of ayahuasca use is having a positive impact at the cultural, intercultural, and socio-environmental levels. On the part of the international community, Alianza Arkana is one of the bright lights. Formerly the activist branch of a large Western-run ayahuasca retreat center, this Pucallpa-based nonprofit is working in partnership with Shipibo organizations

and communities in projects concerned with eco-social justice, intercultural education, permaculture, and eco-sanitation. Numerous individuals with a relationship with the tea have found their way into the ranks of activist groups and conservation organizations working in the Amazon and elsewhere. Then, of course, there are those curanderos, curanderas, *yachaks*, and *taitas* themselves who continue to serve their communities through healing as well as through social, political, and environmental leadership. Lucho Culquiton is one of these, using the income from his ayahuasca center to develop and promote permaculture-style thinking in his community as well as among his international clientele. The Chujandama family runs a center outside of Tarapoto that supports a humanitarian organization aiming to provide clean water and sanitation, as well as awareness of and training in traditional medicine, to neighboring ethnic communities who have lost their shamans. The enthusiasm for ayahuasca has also been good for peoples new to the tea, for whom it has fostered and facilitated a reembrace and revitalization of their own indigenous culture (Pantoja 2014).

In this volume of the *Anthropology of Consciousness*, Jean Langdon shows how ayahuasca and Siona shamanism have been central to the revitalization of Siona culture and the assertion of their rights as indigenous people. After a history of powerful shamans who led the Siona in resistance to colonial forces, a bout of shamanic warfare nearly exterminated Siona shamanism. However, despite a long period of violence at the hands of narcotraffickers and guerillas, the tide turned. The newfound popularity of ayahuasca, in tandem with a global shift toward increased recognition of indigenous rights and culture, led to a full revitalization of Siona shamanism, with *taitas* now taking on important roles as social, political, and environmental leaders. She writes:

*Yajé shamanism is the central pillar of the ongoing ethnopolitical movement that has allowed the Siona to survive as a collective group in the face of the violence and growing economic importance of the region during the last 30 years. [present volume, 198].*

This is a story of shamanism as a form of resistance in historical times and reempowerment in contemporary times. It is a success story of cultural survival, with ayahuasca as a central player.

Coming from a very different spiritual and socio-political milieu is Teodoro Irigaray, state attorney of Mato Grosso in Brazil, Mestre in the Brazil-based ayahuasca church União do Vegetal (UDV), and president of Novo Encanto (New Enchantment), the environmental-advocacy arm of the UDV. Irigaray and co-authors discuss the UDV's approach to environmental and social change through the use of ayahuasca, or as they call it, *hoasca*. This

approach includes rejecting the Western philosophical paradigm of control over nature and, through the teachings of the tea and of UDV founder Mestre Gabriel, seeking control over the self and relations of harmony with others, including nonhuman nature. The authors address the agronomic work that Novo Encanto does in researching and managing the cultivation of ayahuasca and chacruna, as well as their engagement with the state to promote freedom of religion, thus opening the path toward a change in consciousness.

Stephan Beyer once said, in reference to America's short attention span and desire for a quick fix, "I'm old enough to remember when Zen Buddhism was going to save the world. I'm old enough to remember when LSD was going to save the world. I'm old enough to remember when rock and roll was going to save the world. And the world isn't saved yet." (Beyer 2013). In this same discussion, Beyer cautions against the reductionist approach to healing and transformation, one which extracts ayahuasca from its Amazonian context of relationality, mutuality, and physicality. He fears that we are moving toward a model "where people purchase a cure without the demands of mutuality and reciprocity that the indigenous culture envisions for these kinds of healings."

Indeed, if we are going to heal ourselves and the world through ayahuasca, it will not be through glorious visions alone but through the hard work and humility—in Beyer's words, the mutuality and reciprocity—that ayahuasca both demands of us and empowers us to do: building networks of relations that incorporate both human and other than human, addressing the difficult issues, looking demons in the face and standing them down, enduring the painful and difficult moments that inevitably accompany deep transformation, and then sticking around afterward to clean up the mess. Two of the papers in this volume indicate some of the risks and dangers associated with ayahuasca use, dangers that need to be acknowledged and addressed; the other two papers show that within a supportive and cohesive sociocultural structure, ayahuasca can be a force for redemption and social change.



#### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The author thanks Dr. Robin Wright, who originally suggested the ISSRNC panel, and Dr. Baird Callicott, who agreed to serve as our discussant. The panel was partially funded by the University of Florida's Tropical Conservation and Development Program and by the International Society for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture. Finally, many thanks go to Gainesville-based documentary filmmaker Randy Miller, who produced the videos associated with these papers.

## REFERENCES

- Beyer, Stephan  
2013 Ayahuasca, the Scientific Paradigm and Shamanic Healing. <http://www.maps.org/conference/ps13stephanbeyer/>, accessed February 8, 2013.
- Brabec de Mori, Bernd  
2011 Tracing Hallucinations: Contributing to a Critical Ethnohistory of Ayahuasca Usage in the Peruvian Amazon. In *The Internationalization of Ayahuasca*, Beatriz Caiuby Labate, and Henrik Jungaberle, eds. Pp. 23–47. Zurich: Lit Verlag.  
2014 From the Native's Point of View: How Shipibo-Konibo Experience and Interpret Ayahuasca Drinking With "Gringos". In *Ayahuasca Shamanism in the Amazon and Beyond*, Beatriz Caiuby Labate and Clancy Cavnar, eds. Pp. 206–230. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Daut, Elizabeth F., Donald J. Brightsmith, and Markus J. Peterson  
2015 Role of Non-Governmental Organizations in Combating Illegal Wildlife-pet Trade in Peru. *Journal for Nature Conservation* 24: 72–82.
- Forman, Richard T. T., and Lauren E. Alexander  
1998 Roads and Their Major Ecological Effects. *Annual Review of Ecology and Systematics* 29: 207–231.
- Fotiou, Evgenia  
2012 Working with "La Medicina": Elements of Healing in Contemporary Ayahuasca Rituals. *Anthropol Conscious* 23(1): 6–27. doi:10.1111/j.1556-3537.2012.01054.x
- Fraser, Barbara  
2014 Carving Up the Amazon: A Rash of Road Construction Is Causing Widespread Change in the World's Largest Tropical Forest—With Potentially Global Consequences. *Nature* 509(7501): 418.
- Gastañaga, Melvin, Ross MacLeod, Bennett Hennessey, Joaquin U. Núñez, Edevaly Puse, Anita Arrascue, Johana Hoyos, Willy M. Chambi, Jimmy Vasquez, and Gunar Engblom  
2011 A Study of the Parrot Trade in Peru and the Potential Importance of Internal Trade for Threatened Species. *Bird Conservation International* 21(1): 76–85.
- Maldonado, Angela M., Vincent Nijman, and Simon K. Bearder  
2009 Trade in Night Monkeys *Aotus* Spp. In *The Brazil-Colombia-Peru Tri-Border Area: International Wildlife Trade Regulations Are Ineffectively Enforced*. *Endangered Species Research* 9(2): 143–49.
- Monroe, Martha  
2003 Two Avenues for Encouraging Conservation Behaviors. *Human Ecology Review* 10(2): 113–125.
- Mulder, Monique Bergerhoff, and Peter Coppolillo  
2005 Indigenous Peoples as Conservationists. In *Conservation: Linking Ecology, Economics, and Culture*, Pp. 81–103. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.



Pantoja, Mariana Ciavatta

2014 Kuntanawa: Ayahuasca, Ethnicity, and Culture. In *Ayahuasca Shamanism in the Amazon and Beyond*, Beatriz Caiuby Labate and Clancy Cavnar, eds. Pp. 40–58. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Peluso, Daniela

2014 Ayahuasca's Attractions and Distractions: Examining Sexual Seduction in Shaman-Participant Interactions. In *Ayahuasca Shamanism in the Amazon and Beyond*, Beatriz Caiuby Labate and Clancy Cavnar, eds. Pp. 231–255. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Proctor, Rachel

2000 Tourism Opens New Doors, Creates New Challenges, for Traditional Healers in Peru. *Cultural Survival Quarterly* 24(4): 14–16.

Reichel-Dolmatoff, Gerardo

1976 Cosmology as Ecological Analysis: A View From the Rain Forest. *Man* 11(3): 307–318.

Stern, Paul C.

2000 Psychology and the Science of Human-Environment Interactions. *American Psychologist* 55(5): 523–530.

Suárez, E., M. Morales, R. Cueva, Bucheli V. Utreras, G. Zapata-Rios, E. Toral, J. Torres, W. Prado, and J. Vargas Olalla

2009 Oil Industry, Wild Meat Trade and Roads: Indirect Effects of Oil Extraction Activities in a Protected Area in North-Eastern Ecuador. *Animal Conservation* 12(4): 364–373.

Suárez, E., G. Zapata-Rios, V. Utreras, S. Strindberg, and J. Vargas

2013 Controlling Access to Oil Roads Protects Forest Cover, but Not Wildlife Communities: A Case Study from the Rainforest of Yasuní Biosphere Reserve (Ecuador). *Animal Conservation* 16(3): 265–274.

Trombulak, Stephen C., and Christopher A. Frissell

2000 Review of Ecological Effects of Roads on Terrestrial and Aquatic Communities. *Conservation Biology* 14(1): 18–30.

VandenBos, Gary R., and Psychological Association American

2007 *APA Dictionary of Psychology*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

Whitworth, Andrew, Christopher Beirne, Jasmine Rowe, Fraser Ross, Caroline Acton, Oliver Burdekin, and Philip Brown

2015 The Response of Faunal Biodiversity to an Unmarked Road in the Western Amazon. *Biodiversity and Conservation* 24(7): 1657–1670.