

The ‘Vines of the Self’: An assessment of entheogenic shamanic tourism in light of modern identity

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Abstract

The hallucinogenic brew ayahuasca - ‘the vines of the soul’ - has become a coveted commodity for tourists who seek out shamans for spiritual guidance through indigenous rituals. The increase in this type of spirituality tourism seems to be a negating reaction to the malaises of modernity. However, by determining that the particulars of the three mayor components - the entheogen ayahuasca, the ritual and the tourist - are all in support of the individualist search for self-exploration, this paper will show that the use of ayahuasca by tourists in its authentic setting is actually very much in line with modernity and its concept of identity.

Keywords: ayahuasca, entheogen, shamanic tourism, spirituality, individualism

Introduction

The most common critique of modern society often focuses on how it has embraced individualism and secularism, its emphasis on rationalism and the loss of collectivity. Somehow feelings of disconnection abound in the 21st century, as expressed by the growing need for psychological help, the emphasis on group identity markers by ethnic and religious segments of society, and many other forms of resistance seemingly designed to take back control over identity in any way possible. For some, this has led to an interest in forms of spirituality that place less emphasis on the reverence of deities and more on the connection with the self. Practices such as yoga, meditation, use of the Tao Te Ching and mindfulness are all derived from this category of spirituality, as they tend to place the focus on unraveling the authentic “self” from the structures of daily life.

Besides incorporating “other” spiritual themes into Western society, certain elements are actively sought out in their native environment because of a perceived authenticity that cannot be duplicated elsewhere (Cremers, 2010). Shamanism has especially become a romanticized ideal of enjoying a close, almost idyllic relationship with the natural environment which stands in sharp contrast to perceptions of the disconnected world of modern technological society (Foutiou 2010). This stereotype has led to a view of shamanism as an inherently anti-modern pursuit that places its emphasis on the

collective instead of the individual, and the spiritual instead of the rational. Especially when mediated by hallucinogens such as the ayahuasca brew, these rituals are met with skepticism, because they are perceived to facilitate drug-seeking behavior instead of creating “true” spiritual experiences (Winkelman, 2005).

By uncovering the motives for seeking out entheogenic shamanistic practice and its impact on personal spirituality, I will try to show that increased use of these techniques does not signal a rise in drug-seeking behavior or provide a romantic hideaway from modernity, but that they are actually very much in line with modern Western discourse on identity. To start with, pivotal concepts such as “entheogens” and their associated rituals will be explained, as well as their contemporary connection in certain cultures, their reported effect on personal spirituality, and their transformation into tools for modern exploration of identity. Using mostly qualitative data, we will then turn towards an assessment of the motives of shamanic tourists, and conclude that the use of entheogens in a ritualistic environment is not a form of resistance to the philosophy of identity that marks modern society, but a continuation of it. In this context, the importance of entheogens lies in their role as tools, as “mediators between mind and environment” (Tupper, 2002:4).

With regards to the differing nature of these tourists, I will follow Cremer (2010) and make a clear distinction between two groups of

people: “shamanic tourists,” who usually come through travel agencies and have few shamanic intentions or experience, and “shamanic settlers,” who often stay for a longer period of time to explore their own spirituality and/or to come under the tutelage of a local shaman (Cremer, 2010:28).

Entheogens

A relatively new concept, entheogens, can best be defined as all non-addictive, mind-altering drugs used for their religious or spiritual effects, whether or not in a formal religious or traditional structure. The term entheogen - literally meaning “god-containing” - is separated from the general category of hallucinogens by scientists in order to limit the effects of bias towards use of hallucinogens by providing a terminological contrast detaching it from recreational use (Tupper, 2002:2). Besides determining motivations for use as an important distinction, certain general effects on the psyche can also be used to define the concept. As Smith (2000) has argued, entheogens are only those substances that facilitate a deep and abiding sense of “ontological wonder”. The Marsh Chapel experiment of 1962 has proven that psilocybin, the active psychedelic ingredient of hallucinogenic mushrooms, does in fact provide an effect similar to that of a religious experience (Pahnke, 1966); since then, numerous studies have shown that other entheogens such as the Peyote cactus and the ayahuasca brew induce comparable experiences (Walsh, 2003; Smith, 2000). It has even been suggested by several scholars that the typical effects produced by entheogens have contributed to general definition of the human spiritual experience (Walsh, 2003; Roberts, 2006).

Many other strategies conducive to achieving an “alternate state of mind,” such as breathing exercises and deep meditation techniques, have also experienced an increase in outside interest; yet they are less popular and attract a type of spirituality seeker that is often more willing to disconnect from modern society completely because acquiring these skills often takes months if not years of intensive tutelage. Entheogens are a relatively quick and easy way

to achieve a feeling of transcendence, and while their effects are not completely universal, a set of “typical” experiences have been defined. For example, while depending on dosage and environment, those who label their experience as “spiritual,” often report ego dissolution or ego death, rebirth and feelings of unity with nature. In almost all cases, a loss of positioning in time and space occurs (Roberts, 2006), as described by Aldous Huxley in his work *The Doors of Perception*:

“At ordinary times the eye concerns itself with such problems as *Where? - How far? - How situated in relation to what?* In the mescaline experience, the implied questions to which the eye responds are of another order. Place and distance cease to be of much interest. [...] The mind was primarily concerned, not with measures and locations, but with being and meaning. And along with indifference to space, there went an even completer indifference to time.” (Huxley, 1954: 14)

These common denominators make these plant tools especially useful for cross-cultural research on spiritual phenomena; the inherently incomprehensible nature of spiritual experience can now be undergone and described in an academic setting, as was done by Huxley. Although there remains debate on whether having the same state of mind also means that the experience is the same for religious and non-religious people, it is a step towards a more comprehensive understanding of what the spiritual experience entails. After all, the common effects of entheogens imply that the spiritual experience can simply be a byproduct of a chemical imbalance in the body that we can rationally understand (Dobkin de Rios, 1984). In this context, spirituality does not have to pertain to a belief in the metaphysical; as we shall see further on, perceiving the ayahuasca ritual as an assertion of any higher being is more often than not of little importance in the motivations of shamanic tourists (Winkelman, 2005).

Ayahuasca - the ‘vine of the soul’ and its rituals

Ayahuasca - translating into ‘vine of the soul’ - is a tea brewed out of two indigenous Amazonian plants, *Banisteriopsis caapi* and *Psychotria viridis*. While not psychoactive separately, together they can have a strong psychological and physical effect on the imbiber (Tupper, 2008). Used since pre-colonial times, it has served roughly three functions: as a sacrament in magico-religious practice, as a rite of passage and as a medicinal tool. Especially as a religious sacrament, ayahuasca is bound up in an indigenous paradigm of supernatural forces and spirits, “an account corroborated if not validated by the phenomenology of the ayahuasca experience” (Tupper, 2008:2). While the experience itself is of the same category as that of other entheogens, it also has certain unique qualities. The effects of the ayahuasca can generally be felt for about six hours, marked by visual and auditory distortions and an increase in heart rate and blood pressure (Riba et al., 2003). Psychologically the effects can be said to be in line with the ‘typical’ entheogen experience such as introspection, exposure to strong emotions etc. It is common that the drinking of ayahuasca is accompanied by strong bodily discomfort such as emesis, which “is generally regarded as a spiritual cleanse” (Tupper, 2008:2).

The ritualistic setting for the use of ayahuasca is seen as vital by most shamanic tourists. The presence of a shaman as a spiritual guide, and the use of an “authentic” setting have recently become precious commodities. However, the word “shaman” is an ambiguous hypernym that encompasses many types of spiritual guides and healers. Despite this, many scholars agree that one of the key elements identifying the shaman is that he is usually burdened with “the psychological and spiritual well-being of a community” (Fotiou, 2010:81). In many cases, they are also healers of some kind. For the purposes of this paper, a shaman is an indigenous person from areas where ayahuasca is traditionally used, and who presents themselves as an expert spiritual guide in ayahuasca rituals.

With regards to instances in which entheogens such as ayahuasca are used as in

traditional ritual, the specifics may vary greatly. Rituals in which the shaman imbibes the drink and “journeys” or communes with the deities are common (Eliade, 1964); yet one should be cautious of generalizing the form and meaning of these rituals. For example, in some cultures the brew is said to imbue the taker with clairvoyance while in others it is an extension of the shaman’s healing ability, allowing him to see what is making a person ill. Here, the shaman has a socio-cultural role and the rituals themselves are a way of reproducing social structure (Tirri, 2006).

However, ongoing tourism has had a mayor effect on the ayahuasca rituals and their meanings. As Cremer (2010), Fotiou (2010) and Winkelman (2005) note, some of the shamans that now offer spiritual entheogenic guidance to tourists come from tribes that do not traditionally use the brew in their rituals. Generally it is introduced by outsiders and eventually becomes legitimized as ‘authentic’. Here, the global discourse on shamanism and its connection to entheogens changes the local discourse (Fiotou, 2010:79). In other cases, shamans adapt their role in the ritual to fit perceived tourist needs: “In various settings, I observed that religious experts recurrently transformed into what they thought tourists expected to be purely indigenous - the exotic Other” (Cremer, 2010:11)

Here, the rituals and the role of the shaman have transformed to cater to modern tourist needs, turning the ritual as well as its main mediators - the entheogen and the shaman - into conduits for that typically modernistic pursuit: individual self-exploration. Concurrently, the rationale that lies at the basis of the ayahuasca experience as a chemical disturbance in the body can take away its power as a transcendental tool. Both are clear indicators of a shift in the paradigm of the ayahuasca ritual, where the metaphysical is replaced by the ‘self’ - a concept we will now assess in more detail.

The pursuit of the self

Typical modern Western views of personal identity can be traced back as far as the Ancient Greeks. Plato was convinced that the body and the mind were completely separate entities that

only came together to become either “spirits in the material world” or “ghosts in the biological machine” (Taylor, 1992). In the God-centered universe of the Middle Ages, the relationship of an individual with God was usually seen as the basis of personal identity. It was only when Descartes articulated his *cogito ergo sum* that he implicitly formulated the typically modern thought that identity is a “bounded, unique, more or less integrated motivational and cognitive universe” (Geertz, 1974:31), rooted in self-awareness and reflexivity (Kirsi 2006:14).

When combined with another typical trope of the West - Kant’s idealism, the striving for the objective ideal of human perfection - these philosophical markers turn into a practical process (Kirsi, 2006:37). It is in light of this process that many shamanic settlers seek out spiritual guidance, speaking of an objectified “self” that can be explored and tested.

Reported motivations for seeking out entheogenic rituals vary, but can generally be summarized as “seeking spiritual relations and personal spiritual development, emotional healing and the development of personal self-awareness” (Fiotou, 2010). Many of the motivations reported by Winkelman (2005) and Fiotou (2010) had to do with personal growth and healing:

“She was hoping that ayahuasca would give her more imagination, a new direction in life, “the power to see inside herself.” [...]

She decided to come, “to get a big blast to overcome the blockages.” She said she “felt that ayahuasca would push her forward to the next phase, creating a movement within herself.” ”

“His motivation for using ayahuasca was “emotional healing” [...] and his health, viewing it as “the ultimate medicine” to stabilize the mind, calm fears, enhance intelligence and get mental clarity and enlightenment.” (Winkelman, 2005:4-5)

When questioned again afterwards, the benefits

were often characterized as emotional healing, heightened empathy, heightened self-awareness and an assuredness of what path to take in life. These benefits and motivations are all in one way or another linked to the pursuit of the individual identity, doing away with the collective and focusing on the “self” that lies at the basis of modern individualism.

Conclusion

Because all of the components of the shamanic ritual use of ayahuasca can thus be said to be largely in line with modern views on identity and spirituality, the rise in this particular form of shamanic tourism is a continuation and not a negation of modern society. While seemingly focused on the collective as serving a social function, the rituals have been adapted to cater to the individualist needs of tourists who experience their identity and Self as a unique and bounded concept. An entheogen - ayahuasca - in turn provides an altered state of mind that can channel these efforts more effectively because of the specific spiritual nature of these hallucinogens.

Despite the typical experiences many entheogens induce, it is important to avoid overgeneralizations on the subject. The diversity in specifics of the rituals as well as other factors - such as the strength of the entheogen, the guidance received, and the specific type of entheogen - can be decisive factors in any individual experience. Though we can safely conclude that most shamanic settlers are driven by an individualist philosophy on personal identity, the entheogen experience does not guarantee that spiritual and personal goals will be achieved.

Nevertheless, the benefits of entheogens as cognitive tools combined with the adaptation of their ‘authentic’ rituals as well as the kind of motivations for seeking them out in their original context do show that the use of plants in ritual should be looked at in light of a new paradigm, a changing discourse on shamanic rituals mediated by entheogens.

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