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# AYAHUASCA

## IT'S A MIND FUCK

**WORSHIP IN THE RIGHT CHURCH AND YOU CAN DO THIS PSYCHEDELIC DRUG LEGALLY. TOO BAD THEY PROBABLY WON'T LET YOU JOIN.**

**All those involved in the ceremony assemble in a circle.**

The aging hippie across the room may want to better understand death before he eventually faces it. The pale-skinned waitress states she's looking for a release from anxiety and fear. And perhaps someone here wants to learn how to manipulate others. One by one, each person kneels in front of the shaman. He holds a small cup in his hand. Lighting up a *mapacho* cigarette, he blows smoke into the vessel, where it hovers like fog. Each one drinks, then returns to his place in the *maloca* (ceremonial hut), waiting to be transformed.

The participants, like many others who travel to South America or pay upwards of \$150 a pop for a domestic opportunity, are drinking ayahuasca (pronounced *eye-ya-WA-sa*), the legendary psychedelic brew venerated by indigenous Amazonian tribes for spiritual and medicinal purposes. Make no mistake: Partakers are in for a bumpy ride. Hallucinations unleashed by the drug's main psychoactive agent, dimethyltryptamine (DMT), range from kaleidoscopic and sublime to horrifying and grotesque. Add this to an intense physical purging that often includes lots of shitting and puking. You can easily think you'll die.

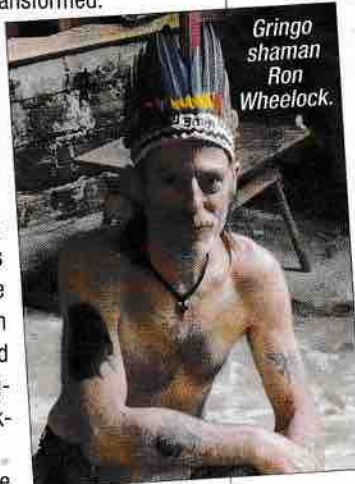
Those who do ayahuasca more than once, however, say these are necessary ordeals. Anything overcome in this state, they say—be it fear, addiction or disease—is also overcome in

the real world. To users, ayahuasca is not a drug or even a medicine, but *La Madre* (The Mother), an entity unto herself that many report meeting and speaking to under its influence.

*La Madre* is worshiped by such South American churches as União do Vegetal and Santo Daime, both with branches in the United States. Israeli philosophy professor Benny Shanon caused an online stir in 2008 when he suggested that Moses may have received his divine visions after ingesting an ayahuasca-like substance.

A small-but-influential and well-heeled group of people in this country has begun to argue for its use in psychological and medical settings as well. Dr. Richard Grossman, a Los Angeles-based acupuncturist who has spent over two decades in the service of ayahuasca ceremonies, says, "In the [Amazonian] jungle there's hundreds if not thousands of tribes, each with their own tradition of using ayahuasca, each with their own songs and language and practices. ... [Many] things are being incorporated in ceremonies now that are really for 21st-century human beings rather than for the people in the jungle."

*Ayahuasca*, a word meaning "vine of the souls" in the indigenous



Gringo shaman Ron Wheelock.



# A S C A

Quechua language of the Andes, also goes by many other names throughout the Amazon, such as caapi, yage, hoasca, daime, mihi and dapa. It's made by grinding up the vine *Banisteriopsis caapi* and combining it with DMT-saturated leaves from either the chacruna shrub or any number of similar plants. Since DMT is naturally occurring to human systems, it would normally be neutralized upon digestion. But an alkaloid within the vine acts as an MAO inhibitor—a class of chemical compounds most notably found in powerful antidepressant drugs—allowing the DMT to sneak past one's metabolism filter to do its dirty work.

Thanks to the efforts of maverick ethnobotanists and their stoned-out disciples,

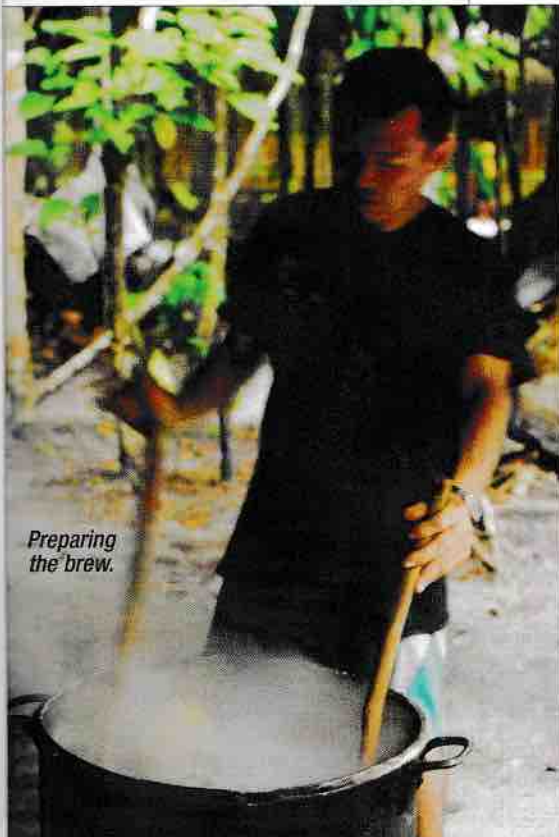
ayahuasca gained a controversial cachet among New Agers worldwide as the 20th century rolled on. The pioneering fieldwork of Amazonian explorers Richard Spruce and Richard Evans Schultes, coupled with the writings of William Burroughs, Terence McKenna and other countercultural icons, brought ayahuasca to the public's attention. In particular, McKenna would connect ayahuasca to UFOs, mysticism and the 2012 phenomenon.

This opened the floodgates for tourism enterprises throughout the Amazon, most notably in Peru, where ayahuasca is legal and locals are desperate for money. Dirt-poor practitioners could strike it rich almost overnight, which has led to many con men mixing in with genuine healers. Regardless, as South America's younger

generation shrugs off ayahuasca in favor of *World of Warcraft*, gringo tourists may be the medicine's unlikely salvation.

Filmmaker Mitch Schultz, who captured Peruvian ayahuasca ceremonies for his upcoming documentary *DMT: The Spirit Molecule*, says: "These cultures have a great wealth of knowledge and not just the use of ayahuasca in that visionary state, [but also] the respect for the natural world and how to live within [it]. I do look at it as a positive thing because it's good for us to be able to access that [knowledge] and hopefully heal ourselves [with it] in the Western world."

However, one shouldn't drink ayahuasca on a whim. Because it's an MAO inhibitor, anything you can't (continued on page 95)



Preparing the brew.



A pre-ritual setup.



The shaman's altar.



A maloca, or ceremonial hut, in Peru.

Shaman Ron with a ritual participant.



(continued from page 91) consume when taking an antidepressant—such as fermented beverages and cheese—applies to ayahuasca. Also, mixing it with SSRIs (another type of antidepressant) can have deadly consequences. People with histories of psychosis are better off leaving it be.

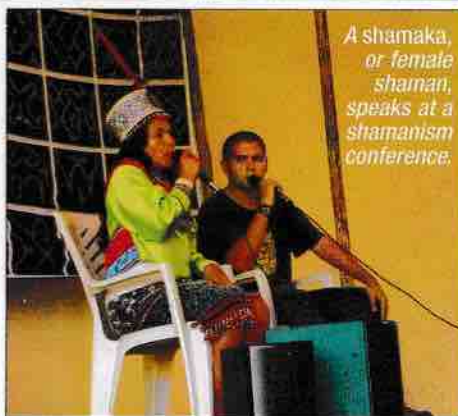
Author Matt Pallamary—who has participated in rigorous ayahuasca cleanses (*dietas*) with Sting and former Alice Cooper guitarist Mick Mashbir—warns: “Ayahuasca definitely isn’t for everybody. I’ve seen a couple of people who weren’t right [for the hallucinogen] kind of lose it, and it was not pretty.”

Because of its overwhelming effects, two models for using and “integrating” the ayahuasca trip have developed. Western tourists usually experience the shamanic model, in which a healer (*curandero*) conducts a nightlong ceremony. He tends to individuals when necessary, singing songs (*icaros*), whisking away negative spirits with fans and blowing tobacco smoke onto his occasionally struggling clients. Relying heavily on intuition and belief in its effectiveness, this form of healing is more an art than a science.

Says Dr. Grossman of his experiences with officiating ceremonies, “It’s a real act of surrender to the medicine for me, because if I get an impulse to sing something that’s going to possibly bring up sadness for them, I’ll do that.”

The model assembled by União do Vegetal (which in Portuguese literally means “union of the plants”) and Santo Daime imposes a greater structure than the shamanic ritual. The proceedings include singing of hymns and a liturgy led by a *maestre* preaching a fusion of Christianity and animism.

Conflicts between the two syncretic churches and the U.S. government led to key court battles that eventually established legal



A shamaka, or female shaman, speaks at a shamanism conference.

use for União do Vegetal and Santo Daime sacraments. Thanks to the Religious Freedom Restoration Act, União do Vegetal’s U.S. president, Jeffrey Bronfman (of the Seagram’s whiskey dynasty), was able to win an injunction for his New Mexico-based chapter to use ayahuasca. The Ashland, Oregon, Santo Daime offshoot, Church of the Holy Light of the Queen, recently earned a similar injunction.

Not so fast, though, if you think these injunctions have rendered ayahuasca legal in this country. The churches’ American branches have a strict vetting process to weed out those who simply want to drink the mind-blowing tea. Moreover, DEA spokesman Rusty Payne asserts that ayahuasca remains a Schedule I substance, and trafficking penalties range from 20 to 30 years. So unless you’ve got the resolve and cash necessary to prove you are using ayahuasca for religious purposes, you are breaking the law. “We still have to enforce this, you know what I mean?” Payne cautions. “Not everybody can hide behind a church case, because only two churches have that exemption now.”

This hasn’t stopped scholars and medical researchers worldwide from attempting to study ayahuasca’s potential benefits for modern civilization. The most famous of these

studies, The Hoasca Project, pitted 15 members of União do Vegetal against a control group in several personality tests. (*Hoasca* is the Portuguese transliteration of ayahuasca.) Overall, the tests showed UDV members—several of whom possessed serious addictive and antisocial tendencies prior to joining—possessed on average greater confidence and reflectiveness than the control group. These UDV subjects credited ayahuasca’s sacramental role as essential in helping them beat their demons.

Pending further research, Dr. Charles S. Grob of the David Geffen School of Medicine at UCLA—The Hoasca Project’s principal investigator—foresees a host of possible applications for ayahuasca in addiction treatment and psychotherapy. But he also acknowledges the many societal prejudices and institutional roadblocks that are standing in the way.

“The drug companies make their enormous profits by developing and marketing drugs which are taken on a daily basis for weeks and sometimes for months or years,” Dr. Grob explains. “You don’t make much money if you’re developing a compound that might only need to be given on one or two occasions, along with a lot of psychotherapy.”

Nevertheless, ayahuasca continues to make its presence felt. If it isn’t making cameo appearances in television shows like *Nip/Tuck* and *Weeds*, then celebrities like Sting, Tori Amos and Paul Simon will name-drop it in interviews. In their wake, risk takers—both foolish and fearless—will discover ayahuasca’s applications for the 21st century the same way Amazonian tribes did—gradually, through trial and error and by listening to an inner voice.

Matt Pallamary believes, “If you really continue on this path, and it’s not an easy path, you’re really working toward being balanced [because] one of the things about ayahuasca is you need to learn to surrender. Not totally give up, but dance with it, to find control within acceptance. It really helps you to find that balance in between.”

**Disclaimer: The ideas expressed in this article are strictly those of the author, are for information and entertainment purposes only, concern a powerful and potentially dangerous drug and do not constitute medical advice of any kind.**

Los Angeles-based Justin Hampton is a veteran freelance writer who has covered sex, music and vice for *High Times*, *Spin*, *Penthouse Forum* and “other fine and not-so-fine publications.”