

Praise for *Ayahuasca y Salud* [Ayahuasca and Health], co-edited by Beatriz Caiuby Labate & José Carlos Bouso (Los Libros de La Liebre de Marzo, 2013)

This book is a stunning, awesome achievement. The editors and contributors have created a magnificent tour de force with a depth, diversity of perspective, and clarity of insight that deserves a place of honor and respect in the library of everyone interested in either religion, science, anthropology, ayahuasca, psychotherapy, drug abuse treatment, and more. This is the epitome of a 21st century book in that it ranges in its focus from the most advanced modern, scientific clinical research to the most sophisticated of anthropological discourse, to the profoundly authentic voice of indigenous healers, all treated with dignity in pursuit of the intangible, ineffable, shadow of the face of God. This edited collection of essays would make a fantastic textbook and offers a multiplicity of interrelated and overlapping but distinct ways of knowing that build on and enhance each other, making the book much greater than the sum and strength of its parts. This masterpiece is a pleasure to be savored.

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Health is a complex subject whose contents are not strictly explained by the purely scientific criteria of medicine. The ideas of expectation and hope, and of commitment and belief, are mobilized in the construction of health, which beyond being a “normal” physiological state (in the static sense in which this word is employed in the work of Georges Canguilhem) is also a set of symbolic references linked to the position of human beings in nature, their community and their inner life, thus reflecting the notion of happiness. The search for health is not only undertaken through the use of medicines but also philosophies, regimes and styles of life and religious concerns. The border between the placebo effect and the mysteries of healing is still vaguely defined. Both in traditional indigenous cultures and the globalized urban world, the use of psychoactive plants always has several significations: one, and the most important, is the search for healing and health. Ayahuasca, in particular, is a great brew made of plants, with diagnostic and healing powers, used by the Amerindian cultures. Gathering together the writings of different authors from a number of countries who approach the subject of the uses of ayahuasca to improve health from different disciplines, from biochemistry to anthropology, is the great merit of this pioneering anthology which deals with both the effects of the use ayahuasca on the health of those who consume it and the meanings which it assumes as the most important remedy in Pan-Amerindian medicine.

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Imagine a large table. A round table, if you may. Seated at the table are shamans and biochemists, physicians and religious adepts, psychiatrists, neuropharmacologists, and

of course, quite a few anthropologists. What would they be talking about? Ayahuasca would certainly be a good place to start. Ayahuasca – the psychoactive potion used in shamanic rituals by Amazonian indigenous peoples – has transcended its jungle origins, and is currently being used in urban centers throughout the world by diverse religious groups, by traditional and not-so-traditional shamans, and in the global psychedelic cyber-market at the margins of the law. As such, ayahuasca has been the subject of a growing body of biomedical, anthropological, historical, and philosophical studies, at the same time attracting the attention of drug control and law-enforcement agencies in different countries. The result has been a harvest of diverse, complex, and even contradictory findings. When the discussion on ayahuasca and other psychoactive substances remains within the realm of anthropology or comparative religion, we are still on relatively safe epistemological footing for most parties, barring the most radical religious fundamentalists and prohibitionists. Cartesian dualism allows for the tolerance (to a certain point) of diverse cultural and religious manifestation as *mental phenomena*, as long as these meditations do not interfere with the dominion of the natural science canon in the rational parsing and understanding of the universal workings of matter. Within the traditional scientific attitude, as much as in the legal defense of “religious” use of ayahuasca, or the insistence in some pro-psychedelic circles on the use of the term “entheogen” (“substance that manifests the God within”), we find a mutual effort to conform to the Cartesian dichotomy, thus assuring a sense of safety and epistemological *status quo*. But when we consider the use of ayahuasca in the context of health – not only mental but also physical, sociological, and ecological – we find ourselves once again in deep and dangerous waters, where all parties (except the original indigenous users) face threats to the epistemological basis of their own sciences, religions or political activism. Is it possible for a Western health professional to maintain a dialogue with an indigenous shaman who claims to interact with forest spirits to diagnose and heal medical conditions as well as ecological imbalances? Is ayahuasca efficacious in the treatment of chemical addictions? Is it possible to separate the measurable neuropharmacological effects of ayahuasca from the symbolic-religious content of the visions it produces? Can ayahuasca – whether considered sacrament, hallucinogen or medical wonder – produce dangerous synergistic interactions with certain pharmaceutical products? Will our roundtable dissolve into Babel? And what is ayahuasca, in the end: Hallucinogenic drug? Medicinal plant? Religious sacrament? Portal for inter-dimensional communication? Or an ambiguous toxic plant that is fundamentally unknowable? Read this book – a dialogue that is as much interdisciplinary as intercultural and inter-epistemological among diverse scientists, practitioners, and activists – and find out...

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