

Spiritual biologicals

Beatriz Caiuby Labate and Henrik Jungaberle (eds.) *The Internationalization of Ayahuasca*. LIT Verlag, Zurich and Berlin, 2011, US\$69.95, ISBN: 978-3643901484

Marlene Dobkin de Rios and Roger Rumrill *A Hallucinogenic Tea, Laced with Controversy: Ayahuasca in the Amazon and the United States*. Praeger, Westport, CT, 2008, US\$49.95, ISBN: 978-0313345425

Reviewed by Meg Stalcup^{a,b}

^aCenter for Biological Futures, Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center, Seattle, USA

^bDepartment of Anthropology, University of Washington, Seattle, WA USA

E-mail: mstalcup@uw.edu

BioSocieties (2013) 8, 234–238.
doi:10.1057/biosoc.2013.10

‘Biologicals’ are therapeutic substances made from living organisms, usually animals,¹ but here also including plants and fungi, and with therapeutic applications that are not only medical. One plant biological, called ayahuasca, has dispersed far beyond its origins in the Amazon principally because of the spiritual qualities with which it is credited. Over the course of the twentieth century, several organized religions developed around the core practice of taking ayahuasca as an ‘entheogenic’ sacrament – said to generate ‘god within’ (Ruck et al, 1979). This development prompted and provided the opportunity for scientific research on the safety and socio-psychological impact of the drug. The expansion occasioned legal challenges and drug policy negotiations in Brazil where the religions began, and in the United States, Canada and multiple European nations where congregations have proliferated. Both

independent shamans and church religious leaders voyage abroad as respected guides. In the Amazon, ayahuasca ceremonies offer, for a fee, psychotherapeutic and spiritual aid, drug treatment or ludic adventure to tourists.

Ayahuasca is, by all these counts, a very successful spiritual biological, one that can now be considered ‘global’ (Franklin, 2005). ‘Global’ does not mean everywhere, but rather describes how, unmoored from original rituals and settings, ayahuasca use is shaped by processes of religious institutionalization, scientific research, travel and legal regimes, which are local, national and transnational, and maintained by flows of global capital. This process of globalization, what constitutes legitimate use, and how that legitimacy is determined, are the foci of Labate and Jungaberle’s edited volume *The Internationalization of Ayahuasca* and Dobkin de Rios and Rumrill’s *A Hallucinogenic Tea, Laced with Controversy: Ayahuasca in the Amazon and the United States*. Many aspects of ayahuasca’s expanding role in the world are examined and questioned in both books, and they ultimately give very different answers.

Ayahuasca is prepared from *Banisteriopsis caapi* (Spr. ex Griseb) Morton. This tropical liana, a Malpighiaceae, contains several harmala alkaloids with some psychopharmacological activity (see especially volume chapters by Ott; Riba and Banbanoj; and Frecska). *B. caapi* alone, or combined with additional species, may be referred to as ‘ayahuasca’, a Quechua word generally translated as ‘spirit vine’, ‘vine of the soul’ or ‘vine of the dead’. However, in the aqueous preparation used sacramentally and in the majority of the academic literature, ayahuasca includes *Psychotria viridis*, Ruiz et Pavón, a shrub in the coffee family Rubiaceae. Rather than caffeine, *P. viridis* contains the potent psychoactive agent N,N-dimethyltryptamine (DMT). Normally, DMT is orally inactive because it is quickly metabolized by the gastrointestinal enzyme monoamine oxidase A (although it can be insufflated, hence the

¹ An example is a vaccine grown in chick

use of shamanic snuffs). The harmala alkaloids in *B. caapi* inhibit this enzyme, so that when brewed with *P. viridis*, the result is a psychoactive ‘tea’ which for 4–6 hours produces feelings of ‘euphoria and well being, altered somatic perceptions and notably modifications in visual perception with open eyes, and elaborate dreamlike visions with closed eyes’ (chapter by Riba and Barbanoj, p. 149). The experience for many begins with nausea, vomiting and occasional diarrhoea. Some report anxiety, a sense of menace or fright. DMT was prohibited as a Schedule I substance in the 1971 United Nations Convention on Psychoactive Substances (see especially chapters by Frecska; Haber; and van den Plas, as well as Dobkin de Rios and Rumrill), a fact which has strongly shaped the struggles – fought anew in each nation – to obtain and safeguard the right to its use.

The Internationalization of Ayahuasca, drawn largely from papers presented at a 2008 conference, is divided into three sections on the ‘cultural, health and legal aspects’ of ayahuasca’s globalization. Notably, appeals to millennial knowledge have been instrumental in legitimizing ayahuasca practices. Indeed, almost any discussion of ayahuasca begins with reference to supposedly ancient indigenous use. Provocatively then, *The Internationalization of Ayahuasca* opens its first section with a chapter by ethnomusicologist Brabec de Mori, who argues plausibly that there is no proof that this exact combination of two botanical species has actually been used for more than 300 years. He marshals, among other evidence, ethnomusicological and linguistic analysis of the songs called *ikaros* (or *ícaros*) that accompany indigenous ceremonies, to argue that the musical diversity that would be expected of older origins is lacking exactly in the region where ayahuasca use is usually described as emerging. This puts him at odds with other authors even in the same volume. However, providing a plurality of perspectives is one goal of the volume. Later, Luna counters

Brabec de Mori’s findings, writing that they do not necessarily hold for the rest of the Amazon (p. 125). Saéz further suggests that ayahuasca might be the main heir to a wide range of psychoactive substances, which indicates that the Amazonian shamanism that people usually seek to preserve is likely a changing body of knowledge (p. 134).

Several chapters are dedicated to different aspects of the ayahuasca religions. Santo Daime was founded in the Brazilian state of Acre in the 1930s, and diversified into multiple branches, including another religion called Barquinha (chapter by Labate and Pacheco). União do Vegetal (UDV) was founded, independently, in the state of Rondônia in 1961 (chapter by Soares and Moura, among several others). These religions reflect a recurring narrative about the multi-ethnic origins of Brazil. Whereas nineteenth-century evolutionist theories held that ‘cultural and biological “miscegenation” between indigenous natives, European colonizers, and slaves brought from Africa’ would lead to a ‘degenerated race’, in the 1930s scholar Gilberto Freyre gave a positive valence to the notion of a racial melting pot (Labate and Pacheco, p. 73). This appeal to three-race Brazilian authenticity is also part of the ayahuasca religions’ narratives. As in Brazil more broadly, they can contain differential privileging, a subtly anti-African rejection by some of spirit incorporation, for example, or a claim to this heritage by others (p. 83).

A few chapters describe informal networks and groups of people who come together, often at some- one’s house or in nature, to consume ayahuasca or its analogs for spiritual (Hanegraaf), ludic (Ott) or health (Schmid) purposes. Religions, and the legal tools available for the protection of worship, however, have been dominant shapers of the global form of ayahuasca. One way this has ramified is that the religions opened themselves up to long-term study. Considerable pharmacologic and clinical research has been undertaken to ascertain ayahuasca’s safety, part of a contemporary trend that is

not of science and secularization, but science and religion. Studies by international research teams found that long-term users of ayahuasca have suffered no apparent harm (chapters by Bouso et al; Lima and Tófoli); strict diets weeks before ayahuasca experiences are not necessary (approximately 12 hours appear to be sufficient; see Frecska, p. 162); and precautions are indicated for those on SSRI antidepressants, but not conclusive proscription (Lima and Tófoli, p. 197).

Another ramification of the pursuit of legitimacy, however, is that the religions abandoned some of their own healing traditions. UDV occasionally used medicinal infusions of herbs with curative properties with ayahuasca (Chapter 2 by Labate and colleagues). The practice may or may not have originated with its charismatic leader, but was sufficiently important that the UDV officially declared its cessation in 2001, apprehensive of impeding ayahuasca's institutionalization and legalization. Owing to concerns about 'hallucinogen-induced persistent psychosis', or back-lash if latent psychosis were to manifest under the influence of ayahuasca, the churches also now screen newcomers for mental illness (chapters by Polari de Alverga; Lima and Tófoli). However prudent, the result is to deny spiritual healing practices to those who in the past might have come precisely because of their symptoms (Polari de Alverga, pp. 214–216).

The third section focuses on legal and policy issues with globalization and, therewith, the organized ayahuasca churches. Any incredulity about the sincerity of faith or genuineness of the religions is likely to be dispelled by the factual, but also personal accounts in the chapters about challenges to the law and law enforcement, in different countries. These include Brazil (Boiteux; Soares and Moura), the United States (Bronfman; Haber), Canada (Tupper), the Netherlands (Plas), Germany (Rohde and Sander), France (Bourgonne), Spain (Marín Prades; Lopéz-Pavillard and Casas) and

Italy (Menozzi). Writing about the struggle to develop a Santo Daime community in Germany, for example, Rodhe and Sander give achingly sad descriptions of religious prosecution, as when 'children of community members were threatened on their way to school, so finally the remaining Daimistas did not feel safe anymore and decided to leave the country' (p. 347).

Sacramental ayahuasca has forced a confrontation between legal regimes for international drug control and laws protecting religious freedom. What the volume's accounts drive home is the fragility of those protections despite the laws, and despite some successes (several Santo Daime groups are now thriving in Germany, and the conference which led to the edited volume was held there). Yet, even with considerable organization and resources for protracted litigation, some groups lost. Where the right to use ayahuasca was won in court, the police have often continued to consider ayahuasca (and the prohibited DMT it contains) within the purview of narcotics enforcement. In the United States, for example, the 2006 Supreme Court decision legally permitting religious ayahuasca use by the UDV was met with the creation of onerous policy regulations from the Department of Justice, which had lost the case. Given the relative autonomy of law enforcement to act, and its investment in drug control, what the volume provides in its chapters are not definitive outcomes, but snapshots of legal and policy struggles that will be on-going.

In contrast to *The Internationalization of Ayahuasca's* dispassionate, sometimes technical language, *A Hallucinogenic Tea* is expressive, also shambolic, given to non-sequiturs and exclamation marks ('Ayahuasca shamanism is a hot topic!', p. 74). The text draws freely on interviews and research spanning over 40 years, and offers interview transcripts, summaries and ethnographic vignettes. Rumrill and Dobkin de Rios both have long histories of studying and writing about the Amazon and its

natives' issues, as well as ayahuasca; indeed, Dobkin de Rios is part of ayahuasca's history, having participated in certain formative events such as supporting UDV in its interactions with the US Department of Justice (pp. 124–125; also Bronfman, p. 289) and as a medical anthropologist working on a UDV adolescent study (pp. 118–121).

The book is divided into chapters on native use, drug tourism, new shamans, the UDV and Santo Daime ayahuasca churches, for which they provide welcome descriptions of the ceremonies not found in the edited volume, and a conclusion that touches on medical applications of ayahuasca, and the impacts of globalization and climate change. Throughout, ethnographic interludes are interspersed with commentary and blocks of 'alternative points of view', which can be confusing, but when not labeled are identifiable by the authors' tone (for example, 'The occasional bad trip experienced by New Age drug tourists leads many to try to make sense of the experience and to learn from it...Long live the bad trip, so we can rise up from the ashes of our own destructive behavior, now removed, and be able to set forth on a new life journey', pp. 82–83).

The authors are focused on what they call 'trendy hallucinogenic ingestion' because it can cause 'harm to participants' and also because they fear that this drug tourism 'changes and effectively destroys traditional urban and rural hallucinogenic healing that has roots in the prehistoric past' (p. 71). They are not against ayahuasca use; on the contrary, they believe that psychoactive biologicals serve a useful social purpose by inducing hypersuggestibility ('Call it mind control, if you like, or brainwashing – but suggestibility is the more accurate psychological term', p. 16). Suggestibility facilitates the functional 'self-deception' of religion, allowing believers the illusion that they can control their environment, the evolutionary advantage of which is that reality would otherwise be too depressing (p.

19). The problem is that this same suggestibility makes tourists taking ayahuasca in the Amazon easy prey for 'pseudo- healers'. Ayahuasca is appropriate, in their view, within rituals, such as those of rural and urban Amazonians, the ayahuasca religions, or the drug treatment center in Peru founded by Dr. Mabit, a French physician who incorporates Catholic elements in his ceremonies (p. 102; also Chapter 13 by Labate and colleagues).

A strength of the book is that the interviews, profiles and vignettes provide information on both purveyors and seekers of ayahuasca that the reader can assess. Rather to the detriment of what is intended as an 'exposé' (p. 2), the new shamans' claims to being able to cure diseases come across as no more or less extreme than those of the shamans held up as exemplary. Although scorn is heaped on the 'empty self' of the 'New Age' ayahuasca tourist, which 'needs to be filled up with calories, drugs, sex, and power' (p. 137), the personal stories of those who traveled to the Amazon to take ayahuasca are touching. As reported to the authors by healers described as 'reputable', or which they draw from other scholars' work, these range from romantic – a French professor was attracted by 'the mysticism of the rainforest', to heart-breaking – 'anguish and depression that I have been suffering since I was 15 years old', rape and cancer (p. 81). Rather than making the tourists seem frivolous or naïve, Dobkin de Rios and Rumrill's descriptions such as 'the ayahuasca user is a sitting duck!' (p. 137) read as an exercise in shaming directed at readers who might be tempted to become tourists themselves.

'New Age' mysticism is arguably (and more charitably) characterized by a flowering of unchurched forms of spirituality, considered part of the 'Fourth Great Awakening' of American religious life. Moreover, sociological research does not suggest that tourism, spiritual or otherwise, indicates an 'empty self'. Rather, 'drug-related tourist experiences are heterogeneous in nature and might involve either a pursuit of mere

pleasure or a quest for profound and meaningful experiences' by people who are 'not necessarily estranged from their own culture' or bored with 'routine life' (Uriely and Belhassen, 2005). The fact of the matter is, however, that the ingestion of a psychoactive preparation powerfully altering the experience of one's surroundings, in an unfamiliar jungle, without a trusted person at hand, has the potential to be dangerous, which begs the question of why Dobkin de Rios and Rumrill don't make a better case against it.

The only aid the authors offer for distinguishing between folk healers and fakes is that 'charlatans do not believe in what they say or do' (p. 88). No substantive differences are demonstrated, although some are claimed. There is mention of sexual improprieties by the 'new shamans who typically seduce and then cast aside female followers or who exhibit crass financial motives' (p. 13), but this is simply asserted. Rumrill is an experienced journalist. Allegations that 'women are seduced, raped, and discarded after their

novelty to the healer wears off' (p. 82) warrant investigation. Likewise, if a woman 'died from an aneurysm while under the effects of ayahuasca' then there must be more proof than the declaration that this was '[a]nother case whispered about among Iquitos residents' (p. 8).

Instead, a quite serious issue emerges about A Hallucinogenic Tea. In their zeal to reveal the dangers of ayahuasca tourism and the damage it causes not just to hoodwinked tourists, but also to local social systems, economies and heritages, Dobkin de Rios and Rumrill make factual misrepresentations. As well-established experts, they must know both the facts, and the damage done by scare tactics that dispense inaccurate information. For example, they write, 'interesting scientific literature exists that links plants like ayahuasca both to the impairment of memory (both storage and retrieval) and to

submissive and obedient behavior in victims who are given psychedelics as a type of "Mickey Finn". In such states, the intoxicated individual follows any command, presents no resistance and offers money and possessions to the offender' (p. 16). However, there are no reports of *B. caapi* or ayahuasca being slipped to unsuspecting tourists. Dobkin de Rios and Rumrill cannot provide a reference. Ayahuasca, with its strong taste, would be very hard to surreptitiously slip to anyone. Rather, this story resembles those told of tourists in Colombia being given 'burundanga' – scopalamine-containing *datura* or *brugmansia* species in the nightshade family, which are sometimes added to *B. caapi*, but are not botanically or pharmacologically related.

'Unscrupulous practitioners', they write, 'give tourists mixtures of 12 or more different psychedelic plants to help them mystically become embedded in the universe. Many are witchcraft plants that affect neurotransmitters, upset the balance of certain brain chemicals, and may even make it impossible to read or write for an entire year' (p. 70). Witchcraft plants can be reasonably assumed to refer, again, to those in the nightshade family, and many do have powerful psychopharmacological effects. They can also cause a short-term paralysis or sluggishness of optic control muscles and nerves. However, those effects last a day or two. There are no psychoactive plants with documented pharmacological effects that last a year. Perhaps they mean to describe a hypertensive reaction and resulting stroke, which could produce long-lasting damage – but that is not what they write, and the intent seems simply to make the tourism experience appear dangerous.

Both books, in their way, advocate for ayahuasca, but they are fundamentally divided on what uses are legitimate, and how they should be managed. For Dobkin de Rios and Rumrill, ayahuasca must be used ritually. They cite approvingly the Brazilian government's approach of allowing it to

religious groups that are ‘properly registered with and recognized by the state’ (p. 145). Beyond that, ayahuasca should be incorporated into a ‘medical/spiritual model’, where ‘a cost-benefit analysis carefully evaluates the ingestion of the plant with health and mental health risks’ (p. 147).

The very diversity of voices and perspectives in *The Internationalization of Ayahuasca* present its opposition to this vision of government control, institutionalization and medicalization. Although the goal of the Santo Daime and UDV leaders has been to integrate ayahuasca religions thoroughly into the mainstream, the danger in their success is that governments are in the position of deciding what counts as a genuine religion. In the final chapter, Sandberg argues that courts must not judge the validity of religions themselves, but rather assess if government interference with freedom (to take ayahuasca) is warranted on grounds such as public order, or public health. Further, although the ayahuasca churches have been fundamental to the globalization of their sacrament, submitting to institutionalization in order to be able to practice one’s belief constitutes a ‘limitation on the right to the expression of religious freedom’ (Boiteux, p. 273).

The differences in these books, in the end, point to how a biological, taken up as spiritual equipment, challenges standard categories of drugs and religion, a result that perhaps says less about ayahuasca than the contemporary anthropological world.

References

Franklin, S. (2005) Stem cells R Us. Emergent life forms and the global biological. In: .A. Ong and S. Collier (eds.). *Global Assemblages. Technology, Politics, and Ethics as Anthropological Problems*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, pp. 59–78.

Ruck, C., Bigwood, J., Staples, D., Ott, J. and Wasson, R.G. (1979) Entheogens. *The Journal of Psychedelic Drugs* 11(1–2): 145–146.

Uriely, N. and Belhassen, Y. (2005) Drugs and tourists’ experiences. *Journal of Travel Research* 43(3): 238.