

The Therapeutic Use of Ayahuasca

Co-edited by Beatriz Caiuby Labate and Clancy Cavnar

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Summary: This book presents a series of perspectives on the therapeutic potential of the ritual and clinical use of the Amazonian hallucinogenic brew ayahuasca in the treatment and management of various diseases and ailments, especially its role in psychological well-being and substance dependence. Biomedical and anthropological data on the use of ayahuasca for treating depression, PTSD, and substance dependence in different settings, such as indigenous contexts, neo-shamanic rituals, contemporary therapeutic circles, and in ayahuasca religions, in both South and North America, are presented and critiqued. Though multiple anecdotal reports on the therapeutic use of ayahuasca exist, there has been no systematic and dense reflection on the topic thus far. The book brings the therapeutic use of ayahuasca to a new level of public examination and academic debate. The texts in this volume stimulate discussion on methodological, ethical, and political aspects of research and will enhance the development of this emergent field of studies.

Co-editors Biographies:

Beatriz Caiuby Labate has a Ph.D. in Social Anthropology from the State University of Campinas (UNICAMP), Brazil. Her main areas of interest are the study of psychoactive substances, drug policy, shamanism, ritual, and religion. She is Visiting Professor at the Drug Policy Program of the Center for Economic Research and Education (CIDE) in Aguascalientes, Mexico. She is also Research Associate at the Institute of Medical Psychology, Heidelberg University, co-founder of the Nucleus for Interdisciplinary Studies of Psychoactives (NEIP), and editor of NEIP's website (<http://www.neip.info>). She is author, co-author, and co-editor of twelve books, one special-edition journal, and several peer-reviewed articles. For more information, see: <http://bialabate.net/>

Clancy Cavnar is currently completing her clinical postdoctoral hours in clinical psychology at the Marin Treatment Center, a methadone clinic in San Rafael, California. In 2011 she received a doctorate in clinical psychology (PsyD) from John F. Kennedy University in Pleasant Hill, California, with a dissertation on gay and lesbian people's experiences with ayahuasca. She attended New College of the University of South Florida and completed an undergraduate degree in liberal arts in 1982. She attended the San Francisco Art Institute and graduated with a Master of Fine Art in painting in 1985. In 1993, she received a certificate in substance abuse counseling from the extension program of the University of California at Berkeley and, in 1997, she graduated with a master's in counseling from San Francisco State University. In that same year, she got in touch with the Santo Daime in the USA, and has traveled several times to Brazil since then. She is also co-editor, with Beatriz Caiuby Labate, of two books: *Ayahuasca Shamanism in the Amazon and Beyond* (Oxford

University Press, 2014), and *Prohibition, Religious Freedom, and Human Rights: Regulating Traditional Drug Use* (Springer, 2014).

Chapter Summaries

Preface, by Beatriz Labate, PhD & Clancy Cavnar, PsyD

Foreword: Ancient Medicine and the Modern World, by Charles Grob, M.D.

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Contributors

1. The Use of Psychedelics as Medicines

Michael Winkelman, PhD

This paper provides an overview of the use of psychedelics as therapeutic agents and their broader healing potentials. The contemporary social concern regarding psychedelic therapies is contextualized within the pre-historical and historical cross-cultural application of these agents as therapies, demonstrating their use for a variety of culture-bound syndromes. A recent edited publication, "Psychedelic Medicines," illustrates a broad range of conditions that may be successfully treated with these agents, including depression, OCD, PTSD, and cluster headaches, as well as schizophrenia. A major contemporary focus includes their use in therapy for the treatment of drug addiction using diverse substances such as peyote, ayahuasca, ibogaine, and ketamine. The various conditions treated suggest that the factors of set and setting play an important role in therapeutic effectiveness. The similarities in effects found cross-culturally, and their consistent effectiveness for treatment of a variety of specific physical and psychological conditions, indicates the important role of biological mechanisms in the general and specific therapeutic effectiveness of these different substances. Similarity in the effects of differing substances points to systematic action of the serotonin and dopamine neurotransmitter systems that can be characterized as psychointegration. While these substances have been used throughout history for therapeutic purposes, their acceptance in the West has been opposed for political rather than strictly scientific reasons. There is substantial scientific evidence for their efficacy in the treatment of a variety of conditions and considerable potential for treatment of disease and illness.

2. The Therapeutic Potentials of Ayahuasca in the Treatment of Depression

Fernanda Palhano Fontes, MSci; João Paulo M. Oliveira, MD, MSci; João C. Alchieri, PhD; Bruno Lobão Soares, PhD; Jaime E. Hallak, MD; PhD, Nicole G. Coelho, PhD, Dráulio Barros de Araujo, PhD

Major depressive disorder (MDD) is generally classified as a mood disorder with a profound effect on the individual's behavior and quality of life. According to the World Health Organization, in about 20 years depression will be the disorder with the most significant repercussions, both socially and economically. Despite the

substantial progress in the development of new antidepressants, their effectiveness remains low, with remission of about 50 % after a single regime of treatment. The most common form of pharmacological treatment of MDD is based on Selective Serotonin Reuptake Inhibitors (SSRIs), designed to increase extracellular levels of the neurotransmitter serotonin. Unfortunately, antidepressants currently available based on SSRIs may take several weeks to achieve the desired therapeutic effects. Therefore, massive effort has been devoted to find alternative treatments for MDD. For example, the use of ketamine, of (+ / -) -1 - (2,5-Dimethoxy-4-iodophenyl)-2-aminopropane (DOI) and β -carbolines are under current investigation. Based on evidence from the literature and a pilot study conducted by our group, we speculate about the possible therapeutic potential of ayahuasca for MDD. In part, such conjecture is based on the fact that ayahuasca combines N, N-dimethyltryptamine (DMT), acting particularly on serotonin neurotransmission through 5-HT_{2A} receptors and monoamine oxidase inhibitors (MAOI), both involved at least indirectly with pharmacological formulations intended for MDD treatment. In this chapter, we will review the major aspects of MDD such as diagnosis, current pharmacological treatments, and the motivations to use ayahuasca as a novel alternative.

3. Ayahuasca for PTSD: Integrating Psychedelic Therapeutic Strategies for Neurotrauma into a Bioinformatics Framework

Jessica L. Nielson, PhD & Julie D. Megler, MSN, NP-BC

This chapter will review the epidemiology of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), the current and candidate treatments for PTSD, and the pharmacology of ayahuasca as a potential new therapeutic candidate. PTSD is a disorder that is affecting a growing number of individuals. Recently, there has been an increase in the number of veterans returning home from duty who are struggling with the symptoms of PTSD. The syndrome is difficult to treat and many victims have been unsatisfied with the currently approved therapies. Alternative treatments for the disorder are being explored, with research and anecdotal reports indicating the potential benefits of ayahuasca for treatment of PTSD. The authors propose a bioinformatics approach to characterize the complex syndrome of PTSD to facilitate rapid and accurate diagnosis and treatment. This approach will help identify risk factors for treatment-resistant PTSD, as well as provide a more thorough and accurate assessment of appropriate therapeutic strategies, including ayahuasca.

4. Moments of Insight, Healing and Transformation: A Cognitive Phenomenological Analysis (*)

Benny Shanon, PhD

In this chapter, I examine moments of special significance in people's experience with ayahuasca. Specifically, I consider moments in which psychological insights are gained, and personal transformation and/or healing take place. The analysis consists of a structural typology of these facets of the ayahuasca experience and is based on empirical data gathered in the framework of a broader study that aims to present a systematic charting of the phenomenology of the special state of mind induced by this

brew. The analysis and discussion are taken from a phenomenological cognitive-psychological, not clinical-psychological or medical, perspective.

(*) Article originally published in *Ayahuasca y Salud*, edited by Beatriz C. Labate and José Carlos Bouso, Barcelona: Los Libros de La Liebre de Marzo, 2013. Used with permission of Los Libros de La Liebre de Marzo.

5. Healing with ayahuasca: notes on therapeutic rituals and effects in European patients treating their diseases

Janine Tatjana Schmid, PhD

Ayahuasca is commonly referred to as a “medicine” and is used for healing in traditional Amazonian societies as well as in recent Western rituals. This paper will report on the results of 15 patients interviewed about their personal experience with the curative effects of ayahuasca. The “healing” the patients narrate was often not limited to the cure of physical and mental diseases, but expanded to psychological, and even spiritual, problems. The qualitative data analysis revealed a variety of positive effects, not only in regard to the curing of specific diseases, but also in regard to a better quality of life and well being in general. The therapeutic effects of ayahuasca in the treatment of various diseases, such as cancer tumors, chronic pain, Hepatitis C, asthma, migraine, gastritis, tinnitus, depression, and alcohol abuse will be discussed. I will also point out implications for further therapeutic approaches.

6. Ayahuasca and the Treatment of Drug Addiction

José Carlos Bouso, PhD and Jordi Riba, PhD

The impact of addiction on public health, with its high relapse rates and the limited efficacy of available treatments, has prompted the search for alternative therapeutic approaches. Recently, there has been a renewed interest in the anti-addictive potential of psychedelics. Use of ayahuasca, the *N,N*-dimethyltryptamine-containing Amazonian plant tea, is experiencing unprecedented expansion. The ritual use of this brew in shamanistic and religious contexts is now popular both in Europe and North America. Studies of long-term ayahuasca-church members in Brazil have recorded reports of drug use discontinuation after the start of ayahuasca use. Furthermore, some treatment centers offering therapies based on ayahuasca as a means to treat addictive behavior claim higher success rates than other more established approaches. In the present article, we review the pharmacology of ayahuasca and the data available concerning its efficacy in the treatment of drug addiction. Although there is some promise for the therapeutic potential of ayahuasca based on the evidence examined, the lack of systematic studies precludes reaching definite conclusions. Ideally, research methodology should be improved, with future studies implementing well-planned clinical protocols with adequate controls, end-points and follow-up.

7. Four Hypotheses Regarding Ayahuasca’s Mechanisms of Action in the Treatment of Addictions

Mitch Liester, MD & James Prickett, DO

Ayahuasca is a medicinal plant mixture utilized by indigenous peoples throughout the Amazon River Basin for healing purposes. This medicine contains a combination of monoamine oxidase inhibitors (MAOI's) and N,N-dimethyltryptamine (DMT). When ingested together, these medicines produce profound alterations in consciousness. Ayahuasca is increasingly being explored as a treatment for addictions. However, the possible mechanisms of action by which ayahuasca treats addictions remain unknown. In this chapter, we propose four hypotheses regarding ayahuasca's biochemical, physiological, psychological, and transcendent effects that may help explain ayahuasca's anti-addiction effects.

8. The Therapeutic Potential of Ritual Ayahuasca Use for the Treatment of Substance Dependency

Anya Loizaga-Velder, PhD & Armando Loizaga Pazzi, BS

This chapter is based on the author's doctoral dissertation, which consisted of a qualitative study that included interviews with 14 therapists who used ayahuasca professionally in the treatment of addictions, as well as with 15 substance-dependent individuals who participated in ayahuasca-assisted treatment in varying contexts. It will address the value of ayahuasca for substance dependency treatment from a psychotherapeutic perspective, and the variables that may influence treatment outcome. Special attention is placed on the role of ritual and integration.

9. Effect of Santo Daime Membership on Substance Dependence (*)

Beatriz Caiuby Labate, PhD; Rafael Guimarães dos Santos, PhD; Rick Strassman, MD; PhD, Brian Anderson, MSc., MD Candidate; Suelly Mizumoto, MA

Previous clinical research on hallucinogen-assisted psychotherapy reported efficacy in treating substance abuse disorders similar to what has been reported in naturalistic studies of peyote use among Native American Church members. Urban use of the Amazonian hallucinogenic brew ayahuasca is increasingly common in syncretic Brazilian ayahuasca religions, and anecdotal reports suggest recovery from substance dependence among those who participate in their rituals. We sought to assess quantitatively the effects of Brazilian ayahuasca-using church membership on substance dependence. We employed a modified questionnaire using DSM-IV criteria to determine the presence of substance dependence within a sample of members of a branch of the Santo Daime Brazilian ayahuasca religion. Nearly half of the church members reported substance dependence before joining the religious organization; of these, 90% reported cessation of use of at least one substance upon which, before church membership, they reported dependency. While these preliminary data require confirmation using more rigorous criteria, they suggest a potential role of ayahuasca, within a particular context, in the treatment of substance dependence.

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10. Experience of Treatment with Ayahuasca for Drug Addiction in the Brazilian Amazon (*)

Xavier Fernández, BA & Josep María Fábregas, MD

This article presents the experience of the Institute of Applied Amazonian Ethnopsychology (IDEAA), created by a Spanish group in the Amazon with the goal of studying and applying the use of ayahuasca in aiding processes of personal growth and the treatment of drug addictions. It starts with a short description of IDEAA's basic concepts and an introduction to the theoretical perspectives that support its application of ayahuasca; these include transpersonal psychology, the Santo Daime religion, shamanism, and various eastern disciplines. The next section discusses practical aspects, paying special attention to rituals, and taking an in-depth look into the healing process through a model of assistance based on minimally interventionist guidance. Using content analysis, the main themes of ayahuasca sessions for addicts were revealed, then discussed and related to dynamics of transformation. The text concludes with clinical observations emerging from the years of practice.

(*) Article originally published in: Labate, Beatriz C. and Bouso, José Carlos (eds.). *Ayahuasca y Salud*. Barcelona: Los Libros de La Liebre de Marzo, 2013. Used with permission of Los Libros de La Liebre de Marzo.

11. Psychotherapeutic Assessment of the Effects of Ritual Ayahuasca Use on Drug Dependency: A Pilot Study

Xavier Fernández, BA; Rafael Guimarães dos Santos, PhD; Marta Cutchet, BA; Sabela Fondevila, BA; Débora González, BA; Miguel Ángel Alcázar, PhD, Jordi Riba, PhD, José Carlos Bouso, PhD and Josep María Fábregas, MD

Using several psychological measures, our team has assessed the possible therapeutic effects of ayahuasca ritual treatment for people with drug-related disorders. The data was collected at the Institute of Applied Amazonian Ethnopsychology (IDEAA) in the Brazilian Amazon. Psychological assessments were made both before and some months after treatment, which lasted at least 3 months and included biweekly ayahuasca consumption. Results showed that the “Impulsiveness,” “Disorderliness,” “Anticipatory Worry,” and “Shyness with Strangers” personality subscales presented statistically significant reductions after treatment, while the “Self-directedness,” “Responsibility,” “Purposefulness,” and “Congruent Second Nature” subscales presented significant increases. The psychopathology subscales “Positive Symptoms,” “Obsessive-Compulsive,” and “Anxiety” were significantly reduced after treatment, as well as all executive functions subscales: “Total,” “Apathy,” “Disinhibition,” and “Executive Dysfunction.” The “Resistance to Interference” neuropsychological measure and the life attitudes and spirituality assessments, including the “Transcendent Dimension,” “Meaning and Purpose in Life,” “Mission in Life,” and “Material Values” subscales, presented statistically significant increases after treatment. Despite important limitations, such as small sample size, the present pilot study provides preliminary evidence suggesting psychotherapeutic effects of

ritual ayahuasca treatment in drug-related disorders.

12. Healing with Yagé: An Interview with Taita Juan Bautista Agreda Chindoy
by Brian T. Anderson, MSc., MD candidate; Beatriz Caiuby Labate, PhD & Celina M. De Leon, BA

Taita Juan is a Cametsa traditional healer and yagecero from the Sibundoy Valley in Colombia. As a member of the new generation of Colombian taitas travelling the world, he has acquired clients and apprentices from throughout the Americas and Europe. He is perhaps best known internationally for having been detained by US Customs officials and charged with possession with intent to distribute a Schedule 1 drug (ayahuasca) in 2010; he was subsequently released and deported. In this interview, we explore Taita Juan's views on how ayahuasca can be used to diagnose and heal illness. We address how clients are prepared for ceremonies (i.e., diet, sexual activity) as well as how he determines which patients can safely receive ayahuasca or other plant medicines (i.e., proscriptions based on health conditions or medication use). The interview also explores how the substance itself is ritually handled, including preparation, dosage, and its combination with other purgative plants and healing techniques such as *limpias*, perfumes and music. We discuss how Taita Juan's treatments are occasionally used in conjunction with conventional allopathic medicine. We also discuss his claims to have cured cases of heroin addiction, cancer, and AIDS, and address the drug addiction treatment clinic he and his assistants are founding in Central America. Finally, the interview explores not only Taita Juan's experience of being detained and released by the US government, but also the legal ramifications this has had for the traditional use of ayahuasca in Colombia and elsewhere.

13. *Post Script: Psychedelics in Unlocking the Unconscious: From Cancer to Addiction*

Gabor Mate, MD

Complex unconscious psychological stresses underlie and contribute to all chronic medical conditions, from cancer to addiction, from depression to multiple sclerosis. Therapy that is assisted by psychedelics, in the right context and with the right support, can bring these dynamics to the surface and thus help a person liberate themselves from their influence. Special focus will be given to the speaker's experience in treating addictions and other stress-related conditions, both with aboriginal people and in non-indigenous contemporary healing circles. This work has been done under the guidance of indigenous Peruvian *shamans and their Western apprentices*.

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