

Ayahuasca and Healing: Notes from the “World Café” at the International Ayahuasca Conference Heidelberg

Anya Loizaga-Velder & Janine Tatjana Schmid

The International Ayahuasca Conference at the University of Heidelberg, Germany was held from May 16th to 18th 2008. The conference covered interdisciplinary aspects regarding, the use of ayahuasca, its rituals, its religious and therapeutic uses, contextual politics and particularly, its expansion throughout the world (see Jungaberle and Labate in press). The following notes were taken during a group discussion on therapeutic aspects of ayahuasca, that took place in the “World Café” dialogues during the congress¹.

After controversially discussing the healing effects of Ayahuasca, the “World Café” group accepted a definition of healing resulting in the following: *healing means more than a cure from disease, but rather to be able to achieve physical, mental, spiritual and social well being and harmony with creation.*

‘True healing’ was understood to come from an inner process and implies growth. Considering this definition the participants agreed that Ayahuasca can be a strong healing tool.

Healing effects of Ayahuasca were related in important portion to the modified states of consciousness and ritual aspects, including the ritual songs, the aromatherapy, energetic interventions of the healers and the spiritual realm.

However, it seemed to be a Westerners view to look at Ayahuasca as a purely positive healing medium. Instead, looking at traditional cultures it is also used for sorcery and can even be harmful. Thus, the traditional view on Ayahuasca would be both: positive and negative.

In the traditional medicine Ayahuasca is understood as a plant that can heal or can harm depending on the person who uses it or the purpose for which it is used.

It is very important not to give patients false hope that Ayahuasca cures all. Sometimes other therapies lead to ‘healing’ and it is important for patients to know this.

It is quite common in South America that shamans refer patients to a western doctor or also, that a western doctor refers patients to a shaman.

¹ The “World Café” is a method for conversational process based on a set of integrated design principles which aim to evoke the collective intelligence of a group (see www.theworldcafe.com).

In this way, some think of Ayahuasca as an excellent training tool for Western therapists, as it can provide profound introspection and insights.

However, if Ayahuasca was to become integrated as a therapeutic tool in western medicine, the aspect of structured ritual and the sacred dimension must be included and not neglected.

In this respect it was mentioned that traditional healers usually undergo initiation processes of many years, which implies the structured use of altered states of consciousness and deep introspection. In their training, traditional healers receive songs that can subtly guide and structure the Ayahuasca induced trance and also obtain tools for dealing with difficult situations in the Ayahuasca experience.

It was said, a traditional healer is as specialized in the therapeutic use of Ayahuasca as a neurosurgeon in western medicine. You could not learn neurosurgery within a few weeks just as you could not learn traditional healing of Ayahuasca in a few weeks. Therefore it was suggested ideally, to work in a multidisciplinary team where Ayahuasca is used in a ritual setting guided by a traditionally trained expert and western therapist in charge of the preparation and integration of the experience as well as medical problems.

But training in psychedelic or psycholytic therapy was not considered as sufficient by many members of the World Café because the indigenous ritual of Ayahuasca was seen as the results of a long experience with the Ayahuasca induced modified states of consciousness, and should therefore only be transformed by someone who has understood it at its depths.

There might be a lot of knowledge in traditional medicine that could make a very valuable contribution to western therapy but has not been explored sufficiently. As a matter of fact, ayahuasca is rarely given to patients in indigenous ceremonies. Usually the shaman takes Ayahuasca in order to diagnose, perform energetic and spiritual interventions or receive indications for healing.

Indications can arise, for instance from an insight the indigenous healer receives through Ayahuasca, such as which healing plants would be most effective for curing a specific disease, recommendations of how to solve a social problem or even insights for who to turn to for further assistance, including a western doctor.

Another point in regards to the transfer of ritual to another culture relates to the issue of cultural integration.

- Should the traditional Ayahuasca ritual be adapted to the western culture or would it be more beneficial if the western culture adapts to the traditional Ayahuasca ritual?
- How much should (or should not) the ritual be transformed in order to gain the most therapeutic benefits?
- How much knowledge in handling the plant is necessary?

In order to prevent harm, a careful preparation, screening, and consideration of contraindications and follow up is important – This would be easier to realize if the use of Ayahuasca became legally accepted.

Reference:

Labate, B.C. and Jungaberle, H., Eds. (in press). The internationalization of ayahuasca. Goettingen, Hogrefe.

About the authors:

Anya Loizaga-Velder is a German-Mexican clinical psychologist who has been investigating the therapeutic potential of the ritual use of psychedelic plants for over 15 years. She currently is a PhD candidate in Medical Psychology at Heidelberg University and is writing her dissertation on the topic: The therapeutic uses of ayahuasca in addiction treatment. She is also collaborating in Nierika a Mexican organization aiming at supporting the preservation of indigenous traditions with sacred plant medicines (www.nierika.info).

Janine Tatjana Schmid is a clinical psychologist working at a rehabilitation hospital supporting patients with chronic pain, musculoskeletal disorders, and cancer. She holds a Ph.D. in Medical Psychology from the University of Heidelberg. Her doctoral thesis is entitled “Subjective Theories of Self Treatment with the Psychoactive Substance Ayahuasca.” A summary has been published as “Subjective Theories about (Self-) Treatment with Ayahuasca in the journal *Anthropology of Consciousness* (2010). Her special interests are in shamanism and psychotherapeutic methods as well as in the psychology of consciousness

(www.schamanismusforschung.de).