

Book Review

The internationalisation of ayahuasca, edited by Beatriz C. Lebate and Henrik Jungaberle, Berlin: Lit Verlag, 2011, 448 pp., ISBN 978-3-643-90148-4

The internationalisation of the ayahuasca phenomenon provides those with an interest in drug use, supply and policy with a fascinating opportunity to reflect critically on the state of contemporary drugs policy and scholarship. Ayahuasca is the preparation that results from the combination of two plants; the first containing the psychedelic compound DMT, and the second, a monoamine oxidase inhibitor that serves to activate the DMT in the first. Ayahuasca has traditionally been consumed as a tea by indigenous peoples in South America, and the use of this psychedelic in religious and healing contexts has a long history. Over the last few decades its use has spread rapidly and globally, and it is becoming an increasingly known and popular psychedelic for westerners. We now find tourists traveling to South America seeking their ayahuasca experience complete with ‘traditional’ shaman guides, and very recently, the emergence of a smokable form of the compound, dubbed ‘changa’; this is, according to my own observations based on research-in-progress, available for purchase from Silk Road, the online ‘dark net’ drugs market.

And so the edited volume *The Internationalisation of Ayahuasca*, emerging from a 2008 conference in Germany, is welcome and especially timely. The academic literature to-date on ayahuasca is largely dominated by, on the one hand, research on its composition and clinical effects, and on the other, analysis by anthropologists and religious scholars of ayahuasca’s historical and contemporary use. The papers in this volume bring together contributions from a wider range of disciplinary perspectives than typically seen in the literature, including from legal and more broadly based policy perspectives. On the whole, contributors to the volume seek to defend and protect the use of ayahuasca, are in favour of drug law reform, and see ‘benefit maximisation’ as a valid criterion for informing drug policy.

The volume opens with a forward by Charles Kaplan, who provides an interesting historical legislative backdrop to an understanding of ayahuasca. Kaplan is critical of the formal international drug control framework, and describes how informal social

and cultural norms that regulate drug use in everyday life might be seen as an alternative to prohibition. For Kaplan, ayahuasca provides us with an interesting exemplar for his stance.

Contributions to the first and second sections of the book are broadly consistent with the wider medical scientific and anthropological ayahuasca literatures. The first section considers the use of ayahuasca in South America, and more widely. Hanegraaff, for example, characterises ayahuasca groups in the Netherlands, and considers how ‘entheogenic religions’ challenge contemporary religious studies. A particularly interesting piece by Ott considers recreational ‘psychonautic’ use of ayahuasca, arguing for the legitimate roles of education, pleasure-seeking and entertainment in motivating use. Enthusiasm (not to say evangelism) for ayahuasca and the opportunities it provides for rethinking the meaning of drug use, policy and scholarship are apparent and refreshing here.

The second section brings together research on the safety of ayahuasca in a way that is broadly consistent with the wider literature on the subject. A review by Frecska concludes that ayahuasca is much safer than believed by the public and even professionals. Original research presented in a number of the contributions seems to indicate that overall risks for ayahuasca users are small and harmful outcomes relatively unlikely. Lima and Tofoli provide mental health recommendations for the use of ayahuasca, noting, in particular, the adverse potential pharmacological interactions that might result in combination with some antidepressants, and interestingly, how advice might be provided to reduce risk for users of such medication. There are two unusual pieces in this section, much less typical than found in the wider literature, each focusing on practices within South American ayahuasca healing institutions. In the first, Polari de Alverga and Rosa call for a dialogue between spiritual and medical-scientific knowledge, drawing on their own perspectives as practitioners in a Santo Daime (ayahuasca church) healing centre. In the second, Labate and colleagues interview the Director of the Takiwai Centre in Peru, which employs ayahuasca in the treatment of addictions. This fascinating interview reveals how practitioners there seek to reduce potential

risks of the treatment to some patient groups (e.g. older people, or those with diabetes, epilepsy, hepatitis C).

The final section of the volume is the one that most readers of this journal are likely to find useful, and these make a fresh contribution to scholarship on the subject. Contributions here describe the various legal challenges to ayahuasca use in South America and around the world. This kind of legal scholarship provides useful critical perspectives on wider drug policy issues.

Much as I enjoyed the collection, it has some weaknesses. Most contributors to the volume have as their stated or implied objective how the benefits of ayahuasca might be maximized (and harms minimised) through global and local policy and legislation. Given this, I was surprised to see such a narrow range of potential solutions on offer, with most contributors in the final section tying a defence of ayahuasca to religious freedom. The case for this strategy is of course a strong one, given the historical and contemporary religious practices that surround ayahuasca. It would have made the volume even more invigorating, and more widely relevant, had contributors considered policy solutions beyond this fairly defensive 'first step' strategy. I would also have welcomed more consideration of the problem presented by ayahuasca's now global trade in a world still dominated

by international prohibition. Finally, the utility of the volume could have been improved by having strong editorial pieces that synthesise the debates addressed within or across the three sections, reflecting on these critically; as it stands, it is hard for the reader to get much of a critical perspective on the volume's contribution.

The book will of course be essential reading for any student of ayahuasca, and of psychedelic studies. Contemporary use of ayahuasca is changing rapidly, and these changes are tied to important debates at a critical juncture for drugs policy today, including the globalisation and virtualisation of markets for old and 'novel' substances, increasing challenges to international prohibition, as well as ideas like benefit maximisation as a legitimate criterion for assessing policy. Ayahuasca, therefore, provides an ideal lens to view these debates. For these reasons, this volume is to be recommended for drug scholars and policy makers more widely.

Judith Aldridge
School of Law
University of Manchester
Manchester
UK

Email: judith.aldridge@manchester.ac.uk