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The Internationalization of Ayahuasca. Vol. 16 of the series Performances: Intercultural Studies on Ritual, Play and Theatre

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Book Review

Labate, Beatriz Caiuby & Henrik Jungaberle (Eds.) *The Internationalization of Ayahuasca. Vol. 16 of the series Performances: Intercultural Studies on Ritual, Play and Theatre.* (Münster, Germany, Lit Verlag, 2011) 448 pages, 44.90 EUR

Reviewed by John R. Baker, Dr.phil.^a

Ayahuasca raises questions of interest for many disciplines. The fact that the brew is made from two different psychoactive plants (each of which is needed for the other to be useful) attracts the attention of botanists as well as pharmacologists. Originally developed by indigenous peoples during the precolonial period of South America, its subsequent adoption by nonnative groups provides anthropologists as well as scholars interested in the spread of religious traditions with an excellent case study of the ways religions change as they move into new cultural contexts. Physicians and psychologists are intrigued by the profound psychoactive properties of the brew and its ability to produce similarly profound changes in peoples' behavior and outlook on life. And because the chemical constituents of the brew are subject to local and international regulations, ayahuasca challenges legal experts and scholars interested in human rights to reevaluate the extent and limits of religious freedom and the proper role of governments in regulating religious behavior.

The 27 contributions contained in *The Internationalization of Ayahuasca* deal with these as well as other topics. The majority of these papers are updated versions of presentations given at a conference entitled "The Globalization of the Uses of Ayahuasca: An Amazonian Psychoactive and Its Users," which was held in Heidelberg, Germany in 2008. These have been supplemented by translations of several works that originally appeared in Spanish or Portuguese. Because

many of the ideas discussed in this volume thread through more than one of the articles, this review will concentrate on providing an overview of these ideas rather than a discussion of each article on its own.

The volume begins with an introductory piece discussing the potential implications that the increasingly global use of ayahuasca may have for international drug policies. This article raises an important question that echoes through many of the pieces that follow: how best to contextualize the use of ayahuasca so that its potential to produce positive outcomes can be maximized while the potential for misuse is minimized. The answer that is most often mentioned in this volume is to embed ayahuasca use within a religious framework. Here we find a lesson learned from the earlier wave of psychedelic use that began in the 1950s. At that time, most psychedelic use involved either a semisynthetic compound which was birthed in a laboratory (LSD) or natural psychedelics which had been removed from their traditional contexts of use through either isolation and synthesis of their active constituents (mescaline, psilocybin) or simply by virtue of being used in "recreational" rather than "sacred" settings (mushrooms, peyote). Consequently, the differences between modern, recreational uses and traditional, sacred uses were relatively easy to differentiate both culturally and legally. As we know, the excesses of some recreational users led to increasingly harsh sanctions on such use, while the comparatively unproblematic use in sacred contexts has been acknowledged by the legal recognition of carefully delineated ritual structures within which the use of a group's "sacrament" can be tolerated. This crucial distinction between relatively unstructured individual use and highly structured group use continues to affect our attitudes towards psychedelics today.

The contributions in Section 1 of this volume, "Ayahuasca in South America and the World," focus primarily on the history of ayahuasca use since the brew was first encountered by the mestizos who would make it into the central sacrament of their new, syncretic religions. Although it is often assumed that the use of ayahuasca dates back thousands of years, we do not know precisely when and where people first discovered that mixing the two principle admixture plants could induce visionary experiences. What is clear is that in the Upper Amazon, ayahuasca is

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used in many ways for a wide variety of purposes. The range of applications and the reasons for which it is used in that region contrast with the methods of use in Peru, which are very similar to one another. This suggests that the brew was first used in the Amazon and subsequently spread into neighboring regions like Peru, where it has not yet had the time to develop into distinctly different traditions of use. How this occurred remains a question to be answered. In contrast, we know a great deal about the steps through which ayahuasca was adopted by mestizo populations and combined with Christian and African religious elements, for the different “churches” that have developed around the use of ayahuasca can all trace their origin back to specific individuals whose first experiences with the brew took place during the twentieth century.

As ayahuasca has become better known, and as the numbers of people who use it as part of a religious organization have grown, these organizations have found it prudent to modify and adjust their practices in order to buttress their arguments about its safety and therewith to support them in their efforts to win legal permission to use their sacrament. For example, one of the largest of these churches, the União de Vegetal (UDV), formerly added a variety of medicinal plants to some of their ayahuasca preparations and administered these to treat specific ailments. None of these admixtures are known to have psychoactive properties, and some of these appear to have also been added to indigenous preparations of ayahuasca. But in 2001, the leaders of the UDV decreed that only *Banisteriopsis caapi* and *Psychotria viridis* (the two primary plant constituents of ayahuasca) could be used to prepare the church’s sacrament. In this way, the church effectively “standardized” its sacramental brew while circumventing the dangers of possible chemical interactions that could affect the reliability of the brew’s effects. A different ayahuasca church, the Santo Daime, formerly used cannabis (which they refer to as “Santa Maria”) together with ayahuasca in their rituals. The Santo Daime subsequently abandoned this practice in Brazil and other jurisdictions (with the notable exception being the Netherlands), both to avoid the problems that could arise from using ayahuasca together with another psychoactive substance and, in this case, to conform with laws prohibiting the use of cannabis.

Section 2, “Medical, Psychological and Pharmacological Issues: How Safe is the Use of Ayahuasca?” presents the results of studies into how ayahuasca acts upon the body and the mind. This section contains papers on brain activity, the metabolic pathways of ayahuasca in the brain, and the role that genetic differences between individuals may play in the enzymatic clearance of the metabolites of ayahuasca (which may be related to differing subjective responses to the brew). There is also a discussion of the results of psychological tests administered to members of ayahuasca churches. These

papers echo the findings of prior research indicating that ayahuasca is safe when used in a suitable and supervised setting by people who have been prescreened for certain personal and medical issues.

As part of their efforts to gain legal and social acceptance, both the UDV and the Santo Daime churches have welcomed mental health professionals and other scientists to conduct research among their members. These ayahuasca churches have also been proactive in developing parameters for using their sacrament, for prescreening prospective members before they are given ayahuasca, and for monitoring experienced members for signs of continued good health. All of these steps have helped them to avoid many of the problems that occurred during the earlier wave of largely idiosyncratic psychedelic use.

The papers in Sections 1 & 2 address questions that have already been the subject of study by anthropologists, psychologists, physicians, and others, and the well-informed reader will likely find that these supplement research with which they may already be familiar. In contrast, the contributions in Section 3, “The Development of a Global Debate on Ethics and Legalization,” deal with issues that are less well-known. It is with regard to these questions that the present volume makes its most important contribution, for it provides information about the various legal cases that have faced ayahuasca both at home in South America and in North America and Europe.

Many of these contributions were penned by the lawyers and legal scholars who were involved in adjudicating important ayahuasca cases in North American and Europe. Their contributions trace the developments in Brazil that led to that country’s legal recognition of ayahuasca as a sacrament central to several churches, and they discuss the many ways that the adherents of these churches have dealt (both successfully and unsuccessfully) with legal challenges in the U.S., Canada, the Netherlands, Germany, France, Spain, and Italy. The various legal arguments that have been advanced as well as the differing responses of the authorities cast a clear light on the patchwork of laws and other regulations that govern religious freedom in general and the use of psychedelic substances in particular.

Because this volume focuses on ayahuasca use within a recognized religious context and the efforts of the ayahuasca churches to gain legal recognition of their right to consume their sacrament, *The Internationalization of Ayahuasca* could have been titled “the institutionalization of ayahuasca.” It is clear that the leaders of these churches have indeed learned much from the earlier attempts to gain acceptance for the use of psychedelics. They have exerted themselves to produce a consistently standardized brew within the limitations involved when working with natural plant ingredients. They have learned how to prepare—and screen out—individuals prior to their first experience with ayahuasca. And they have standardized their ritual

practices as they have learned how to manage the altered state produced by the brew.

The use of ayahuasca within a religious context is defended well and thoroughly in this volume. But to its credit, it also considers the use of ayahuasca outside of the various ayahuasca churches. There is a growing interest in ayahuasca among individuals that self-identify as neopagan, New Age, psychonauts, or the just plain curious. Although their motivations for using ayahuasca vary, most are motivated by a desire to improve their health (however understood) and to explore their inner worlds. While ayahuasca use in general questions our existing attitudes and laws about drugs, this more idiosyncratic use represents the greatest direct challenge to our century-old drug laws. Thus, the final contribution to the volume provides an overview of various legal approaches toward drug use and the law. Here, it is suggested that persons arguing for the expanded use of ayahuasca should avoid questions as to whether a specific practice is religious or not, and focus instead on whether the continued prohibition of such practices is justified by the other needs of a society.

As this volume points out, there are other problems associated with the globalization of ayahuasca than the merely legal. One negative outcome of the increased interest in ayahuasca in South America has been a shift in the efforts of many traditional healers to treating foreigners instead of locals. This has had a great impact on the ability of local people to access health care. There is clearly more money to be made in offering ayahuasca to foreigners, and this has also led to deceptive practices by some "healers," the administration of adulterated brews with dangerous admixtures (such as nicotine and tropane alkaloids), and the inability of some purported healers to recognize and treat adverse reactions. In addition, the increased use of antidepressants and other pharmacological agents can lead to health risks in susceptible individuals. All in all, ayahuasca provides a clear reminder that psychedelics are not a panacea, and they are not appropriate for many individuals.

Even when a person can tolerate ayahuasca, this is not a guarantee of a positive experience. In the indigenous and mestizo contexts, and in the ayahuasca churches, complex symbolic systems have been developed that both shape the experience and provide a system within which the individual can understand and integrate their experiences. In contrast, the use of ayahuasca by someone who does not have a similarly rich interpretative system may occasionally lead to psychological and existential issues that may be difficult to resolve. To counter this, some of the contributors to this volume argue for the development of forms of ayahuasca use that take the cultural contexts of outsiders more clearly into consideration by using symbols and language that they understand. The implication is that those people who would prefer to use ayahuasca outside of the context of one of the ayahuasca churches (which use a

variety of Christian and African symbols that do not appeal to everyone) could benefit from a greater understanding of the set and setting provided by these churches and by adopting at least some of their guidelines for their own. Unfortunately, even if they borrow these structures, these individuals may remain unaware of the health and medical parameters that should be met in order to minimize the possible side or adverse effects of using the brew. Thus, such *ad hoc* use is problematic for medical as well as legal reasons.

Since the two primary constituent plants that are used to make ayahuasca can only grow in the tropics, the expansion of the ayahuasca churches into other regions poses additional problems related to the need to grow these plants in tropical areas and then export the brew to other countries. This places increased demands on the tropical environments in which the plants are grown, and diverts these products from local consumers. One possibility discussed in this volume would be to produce ayahuasca analogues that contain the same active constituents, but can be derived from plants that can be grown outside of the tropics. While this could address the problems related to both environmental degradation and exportation, it would also open the door to a number of other problems having to do with the normal differences in natural products and the differing abilities of those who would prepare the plants into the finished preparations. Such a "solution" also fails to address the need to have persons present who possess the necessary knowledge and experience to recognize and deal with any medical or psychological emergencies that could arise when these analogues are being used. Consequently, it may only be a question of time before the same problems appear that also occurred during the earlier wave of psychedelic use, when increasing numbers of people—including some who would be considered unsuited for such use—began to experiment with varying mixtures of drugs for whose effects they were not adequately prepared.

Unfortunately for all those who may conscientiously and appropriately use ayahuasca and related substances in a safe and controlled setting, there will be others whose experiments and experiences will not be so positive, and who will consequently attract the attention of the medical, legal, and political establishments. The manner in which the members of the ayahuasca churches—and the wider circle of people who recognize that psychedelics have the potential to benefit a large number of people when used appropriately—deal with such instances will do much to determine whether the current internationalization of ayahuasca is truly a force that will alter the public's perception of these compounds, or whether it too will one day be seen as yet another wave of psychedelic use that, like its predecessor 60 years earlier, fell victim to its own excesses. The key, as this volume repeatedly stresses, is to develop clear ethical guidelines for using ayahuasca (and other compounds), for determining beforehand which

individuals could benefit and which are likely to experience an adverse reaction, and for training leaders to oversee the ayahuasca sessions and facilitate the integration of the participants' experiences.

Overall, *The Internationalization of Ayahuasca* will offer much to the interested reader, especially those who have already acquired some knowledge of the history and uses of ayahuasca. The volume is not without its flaws. Some of the papers that were written in Spanish or Portuguese suffer from poor translation, and the entire

volume could have benefited from a more careful copy-editing. A few of the papers are idiosyncratic and address questions that are more tangential than central. Still, these shortcomings aside, this work is an important contribution to the growing literature on ayahuasca, and should be read by any serious student of the subject. It provides not just a summary of where things stood at the time of its publication, but also a road map for anticipating the possible paths that ayahuasca use and research will travel in the future.