



## BOOK REVIEW

*The Internationalization of Ayahuasca*, Beatriz C. Labate and Henrik Jungaberle, eds. Zurich Switzerland, Lit Verlag, 2011. 446 pp. ISBN 978-3-643-90148-4, \$69.95.

This book, *The Internationalization of Ayahuasca*, represents a remarkable synthesis of perspectives, analyses, data sources, and conversations on the subject of the use of ayahuasca, a “hallucinogenic” substance used traditionally in South America. As described by the book’s editors, the volume—an edited collection comprised of more than two dozen chapters—is the result of an international conference held in Heidelberg, Germany in 2008. The conference promoted a mutual dialogue among diverse ayahuasca researchers and users from Western societies and indigenous groups, spiritual and religious leaders, and activists. This volume offers a richly multidisciplinary discussion of ayahuasca, bringing together multiple cultural, health, and legal aspects. This book will be of great interest to scholars and students of ritual healing practices and traditions and the politics, contestations, and plurality of voices and perspectives surrounding their global spread and regulation. It makes a meaningful contribution to the contemporary discussion of international drug policy because it works up and down multiple levels to show how the regulations, uses, meanings, effects, and properties of ayahuasca confound the simplistic prohibitionist policies that continue to predominate. Ayahuasca, the contributors make clear, is an ideal case study for understanding the paradoxes and problems of the formal international drug control system and the deep meaning and value that indigenous groups invest in the ritualized use of substances that at a global level are problematized or prohibited.

Ayahuasca is a preparation generally made from two plants and has been traditionally used by indigenous people in the Amazon. This preparation has psychotropic effects that are the result of certain chemical compounds

contained in the plants. In their classic book, *The Yage Letters* (1963), beat writers Allen Ginsberg and William Burroughs narrated their interest in the cultural myths and lore associated with ayahuasca, their search for it in South America, and their personal use of the brew. Indeed, in the recent past, an interest in ayahuasca among Westerners has developed. It has been increasingly used in settings outside of the indigenous religious, ritual, cultural, and socio-moral contexts in which it has historically been used. Consequently, ayahuasca came under international political and legal scrutiny. The active chemicals have been classified as controlled substances, now linked to prohibitionist drug policies, while at the same time mechanisms for publicly debating and generating scientific and practical knowledge about the therapeutic effects and hazards of ayahuasca use and integration into healing approaches are greatly influenced by this prohibitionist response. “As long as ayahuasca use was imbedded in the exclusive cultural, religious, spiritual and healing practices of the indigenous peoples of the Amazon,” writes Charles Kaplan, the author of the book’s very insightful and helpful forward, “it was not an issue of public or interdisciplinary academic attention much less of international drug control. However, the broad process of the internationalization of ayahuasca use has changed all of that” (15).

The volume covers the gamut of topics related to ayahuasca, so it offers comprehensive, single-volume coverage of the issue and is therefore a most teachable instrument and an essential resource for a range of researchers and practitioners. In the volume’s first section, contributors explore many of the cultural, historical, social, and geographical components of ayahuasca, looking at its origins in South America and the spread to the wider world; the ethnohistory of ayahuasca usage in the Amazon, ethnobotany, ethnomedicine, and traditional healing practices; the syncretic religious and cultural contexts that developed around ayahuasca in postcolonial settings in South America; and the ways that transnational sociality and social networks have taken shape as the “ayahuasca religion” has spread to Europe and the United States. The chapter by Bernd Brabec de Mori provides a fascinating ethnomusicological analysis of songs associated with ayahuasca or related to ayahuasca sessions, while Jonathan Ott gives us a rich ethnography of “ayahuasca tourism,” the complex politics of representation and identity that is a part of the uptake and consumption of ayahuasca in nonindigenous settings, and the important relation among ritual, respect, and use that is a common characteristic of ayahuasca cultures.

There are several powerful arguments in this section, including the empirically and historically based notion that ayahuasca traditions are dynamic and should not be regarded as being culturally communicated in any simple way since time immemorial. These traditions have deep roots, the chapters show, but they also call our attention to change, dynamism, practice, and geographical and

ecological transformations and movements within traditional ayahuasca cultures, and they argue that this is one way of conceiving of the ongoing internationalization of usage practices and cultures. There is also the argument that the global uptake of, and interest in, ayahuasca that we have seen in past decades has been woefully neglected by scholars of religion and globalization, even though the contemporary Western ayahuasca milieu presents interesting theoretical and methodological challenges related to defining and studying transnational networks and religious movements.

In the second section, contributors cover the medical, psychological, and pharmacological facts and issues that surround the use of ayahuasca, including detailed discussions of the safety and health risks that are associated with ayahuasca use. Chapters cover clinical studies, discussion of acute and long-term effects, the main effects and side effects of use, and how ayahuasca compares to other “hallucinogens.” The chapter by Alex Polari de Alverga represents a fine medical anthropological account of how spiritual healing in an ayahuasca tradition interfaces with scientific and medical knowledge, and the important need for clinical approaches to take into account the value and meaning of ayahuasca use within these groups and the importance of engaging dialogically with them. In this way, the book contributes a familiar anthropological argument, upholding the relevance of local knowledge, studying patients and healers in contexts of culture, and challenging Western biomedicine to attend to the role of cultural forms, including ritual and belief, in healing processes. The chapters open a discussion of some potentially beneficial results of ritualized use of ayahuasca on mental health while also acknowledging that there is a long way to go in this field of research and investigation and that much more needs to be researched to have a full and reliable picture of the short-term and long-term effects of use.

The third section of the book goes into the legal domain, looking at legal cases in which ayahuasca use is at stake, being debated, or plays a role, and this provides a basis for broadly discussing current ethical, political, and legal matters that surround ayahuasca use in the world today. Chapters look at the ways that the current situation in Brazil represents an intermediate approach, with a reduction in penal control over users, very different than how controlled substances have been dealt with in the United States. They examine the fundamental legal, political, and theoretical contradiction in a modern society between rights to religion and spiritual life and the biopolitics of regulating substances and behaviors. Chapters also explore the difficulty in distinguishing between ayahuasca use in formally recognized religious organizations and ayahuasca use in the so-called postmodern varieties of spiritual and religious experience and affiliation. These are immensely interesting and rewarding chapters. There are several legal case studies looking at the ways that organizations and groups devoted to ayahuasca use have sought formal

recognition from governments or have been included in legal disputes involving the use of ayahuasca, the status of ayahuasca in relation to international law, and issues of sovereignty.

This book is detailed, truly a resource of vast amounts of information, and yet it also feels very coherent, clearly based on a set of issues pertaining to the questions of whether, how, and in what contexts ayahuasca is and/or ought to be used, including the meanings, values, and effects of this use and the contemporary political impulses that seek to regulate it. It takes a neutral tone and invites further questioning and engagement.

This book will be of interest to scholars who work on ethnobotany, on the anthropology of consciousness, on studies of how consciousness—in this case psychoactive chemicals—is regulated and managed, and on the global spread, the commercialization, and the regulation of traditional medicinal and botanical knowledge. This book brings many different areas of knowledge together so that the result is an integrated whole, covering issues that span politics, culture, history, science, and policy. At the book's core is an effort to understand ayahuasca for what it is—a substance used traditionally, for many years by indigenous groups, one with distinctive effects, and one which has often been the subject of controversy as a result of its internationalization. Questions are raised, evidence is weighed carefully, and multiple perspectives are organized to meet and interface so that this book, however comprehensive, ultimately points to the need for much more research on ayahuasca and other psychoactive substances from a range of disciplines, a robust debate about the politics and ethics of regulating their usage, and the social and cultural dynamics that are a part of their global spread.

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