

Introductory Remarks: Opening Session of the 2014 World Ayahuasca Conference¹

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- I am very happy to be here today. This has been a long process. Welcome everybody!
- I am here representing the Advisory Scientific Committee of the 2014 World Ayahuasca Conference. We were a group of four: myself, a Brazilian anthropologist who currently resides in Mexico; and three members of ICEERS: Jordi Riba, a pharmacologist from Spain, José Carlos Bouso, a Spanish psychologist with a PhD in pharmacology, and Rafael Guimarães dos Santos, a Brazilian biologist who did his PhD in pharmacology.
- I consider this to be an historical moment. This is for sure the largest, most diverse, and complete conference on ayahuasca in world history.
- This conference is the climax of a series of international gatherings that have been organized about ayahuasca since the early nineties - such as the UDV Hoasca conference in Rio de Janeiro in 1995, the 1st CURA in 1997 in Campinas, the Ayahuasca Conference in 2000 in San Francisco, Psychoactivity in Amsterdam in 2002, Las Jornadas de Ayahuasca in Spain in 2002, the Globalization of Ayahuasca in Heidelberg in 2008, the Ayahuasca Track in the Psychedelic Science Conference in 2013 in Oakland, among others.
- *This conference is not strictly academic.* It's goal is to contemplate a diversity of perspectives and discourses, such as the social sciences, biomedicine, and "native knowledge." The presenters include scientists, academics, shamans, religious leaders, therapists, facilitators, legal experts, government authorities, environmentalists, practitioners, psychonauts, enthusiasts, artists, writers, mothers, and movie-makers.
- The conference is structured so that, on the one side, there is the "*Primary Track*," composed of a series of roundtables or panels. The emphasis here is on a collective dialogue and interchange of ideas, with a more dynamic and fluid structure.
- On the other side, there is a *Thematic or Specialized Track*, a result of our public *Call for Abstracts*. This is divided into (1) an *Academic Forum*, composed of (a) Social sciences; (b) Phenomenology, Psychology, and Public Health and (c) Biomedicine; (2) a *Legal Forum*; and (3) a *Community Forum*. Here, the presentations are individual, and more formal.
- Apart from this, there is a series of parallel activities, such as the Ayahuasca Film Forum, launchings of books, artwork, performances, and presentation of projects and institutions of the field.

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- All venues are equally important. There is no hierarchy between them.

- The presenters include pioneers of this field—names such as Antonio Escotado, Claudio Naranjo and Jonathan Ott—and a whole new generation of young and energetic folks.

- Following the call for abstracts, more than 100 abstracts were received! In other words, this was a huge success, and reveals a real boom in this field; both in terms of geography, with proposals coming from many unexpected countries, and in terms of disciplines and perspectives included.

- The experience of selecting these presentations was challenging. We have created several different methods and approaches, re-organized according to our own criteria, had many back and forth discussions... got stressed... but also felt joy. ☺ During this process, it became clear to us that this conference captured the spirit of our times. It represents an opportunity for many people to come out of their hiding place and tell their story, present their hypothesis, meet their peers, speak their truth.

- We apologize to the people we had to exclude. Many of them were legitimate proposals. We ask for their comprehension and hope that a future conference will be even more inclusive.

- One important aspect of this conference is its focus on native knowledge. We have invited representatives from different indigenous and mestizo communities, hoping that their voice will be heard. They are not our “object of study”; they can speak for themselves, and engage in dialogue with academics in a broad multicultural and interdisciplinary gathering.

- We have also created a special place of speech in the “*Community Forum*” for representatives of urban contemporary non-native ayahuasca traditions, in tune with our view that these are also legitimate cultural manifestations. We believe in the diversity of this movement, and are open to its multiple branches and variations.

- We have tried to bridge the gap between the English and Spanish-speaking world, and have simultaneous translations.

- Many things could be said about the content of this conference, and it is hard to choose what to comment on now. But for sure, we cannot leave out the importance of the pioneering studies of Dr. Jordi Riba and his team in the global and Spanish context. These studies, which are more than 15 years old, are remarkable for their novelty and their methodological rigor. They are among the most important studies in the human pharmacology of ayahuasca; using double-blind, placebo-controlled designs, performed in a clinic context, and with an increased representative number of participants. They include long-term consumers, and neuroimaging. If these studies had not been conducted

in Spain, the conference would probably not be held here.

- Likewise, it is important to point out the clinical studies about the anti-depressant and anxiolytic effects of ayahuasca that are being conducted at the University of São Paulo (USP) in Ribeirão Preto, Brazil, by Dr. Jaime Hallak and his team, and also similar studies led by Dr. Draulio Araujo and his team in the Federal University of Rio Grande do Norte (UFRN), Natal, Brazil. These studies are important because they are the first ones conducted with patients in a clinical context; they also use neuroimaging. Paulo Barbosa, on the other hand, will present the first results of his neuroimaging study with long-term users in the Brazilian ayahuasca religion of the União do Vegetal (UDV).

- The area of health-related studies is definitely one of great vigor and interest. The various virtues of ayahuasca are explored, from its potential in the treatment of diseases and ailments—such as depression, problematic drug use, and mental health problems—to its potential for improving psychological well-being and in helping people cope with death.

- On the social sciences front, there is also a process of flourishing. I'd like to point out the launching of our book, co-edited by Clancy Cavnar and me, *Ayahuasca Shamanism in the Amazon and Beyond*, published through the prestigious Oxford University Press. We try to present a balanced view on the phenomenon of the spread of Amazonian shamanism throughout the world that combines both a critical and tolerant perspective towards this expansion.

- The legal and human rights forum is another great contribution of this conference.

- Spain has given rise to the “Ayahuasca Platform,” an initiative that unites different users from around the country to establish a common alliance and code of ethics. Perhaps it is not a coincidence that this country now also sees the birth of ICEERS' legal efforts. The main goals of this initiative are (a) The establishment of an International Committee of experts; and (b) the development of a global strategy for the normalization of ayahuasca. We hope to hear more about this important initiative in the future.

- We did not try to avoid the challenge of addressing hard and controversial topics. Presentations delve into exploring the several challenges of expansion, such as legality, ethics, security, sustainability, gender imbalance, religious dogmatism, and health-related risks.

- Arts, music, movies, and poetry are also on board. The sensible and human documentary of Ben de Loenen about the Chilean legal case will be presented for the first time. Come check it out!

- Perhaps one of the greatest achievements of this conference is to place ayahuasca within the larger context of international drug policy. The presence of all or you here today; of government representatives; and of renowned institutions and NGOs on the drug policy and drug research field shows us that ayahuasca is no longer an obscure beverage used by

a minority group somewhere in the remote Amazon, but a central matter in the contemporary drug policy, public health and human rights debates.

- The expansion of ayahuasca spirituality into the Western world provides us with many provocative thoughts. Such expansion should be understood within the diaspora movement of the global southern religions towards the North, and reflects the increasingly relevant role of Latin America in the global religious scenario. Moving from the periphery towards the economic and political centers, this trend is significantly different from the historical process of Europeanization of Latin American religions. Unlike the colonial situation, this process does not involve political imposition or forced religious conversion. The internationalization of these practices illustrates the religious ambivalences and controversies of our times, and thereby stimulates discussion of key issues regarding modernity itself.

- This is especially interesting if we take into account that the number of psychoactive substances, especially the so-called "hallucinogens," is in fact much larger in the American continent than in the rest of the world, as noted by Richard Evans Schultes and Albert Hofmann in their classic book *Plants of the Gods*. Perhaps the expansion of ayahuasca is the actualization of an ongoing cultural exchange, where substances like tobacco, coca, guaraná, and yerba mate, spread beyond their American origin to the rest of the world.

- Coming back to our conference: The support of UNESCO for this initiative shows us that ayahuasca can be understood and recognized as part of an Amazonian identity, as well as an effervescent international cultural phenomenon. The use of this brew cannot be reduced to a mere "drug consumption," but should be understood within a larger historical and socio-cultural context, and perhaps as a collective cultural heritage.

- We hope this conference is both enlightening and fun. May we be able to properly honor these beautiful traditions, and continue to explore what the people in the Amazon call the "a ciência da natureza", the "science of nature."