

Ayahuasca Track Opening Speech at the 2013 Psychedelic Science Conference

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I am very pleased to be here today. I want to thank the conference organizers for their openness to the topic of ayahuasca, and the participants of the Ayahuasca Track for accepting my invitation to join our gathering. I also would like to thank my University, CIDE (Center for Economic Research and Education), in Aguascalientes, Mexico, and thank you all for coming.

I am happy to stand here and see this big audience, more than 275 years after a Jesuit missionary first reported on ayahuasca use in Peru, more than 150 years after botanist Richard Spruce identified Banisteriopsis use among the Indians of the Northwest Amazon, 90 years after its active principles were isolated, 80 years after DMT was synthesized in a laboratory for the first time, 50 years after Burroughs and Ginsberg published their classic book Yagé Letters, 37 years after Terence McKenna and Kat Harrison – who is present here today, and who was in her mid twenties then – took off for their trip to Peru, and 28 years after the Americanists conference in Bogotá, which held a pioneering symposium on ayahuasca. All this happened at a time when it was not possible to type ‘ayahuasca’ into Google on your computer.

Ever since the Europeans colonized the New World and “discovered” the Amazon, the jungle and indigenous populations have been fascinating us. Ayahuasca or yagé seems to derive its power, as anthropologist Michael Taussig puts it, from the Amazon forest and its populations. The Amazon is fertile, mysterious, creative, and powerful; but also dangerous, hostile, chaotic and demonic. Colonial imagination attributed special magical abilities to the inhabitants of the forest, the tropical Indians. Their supposed wildness, mirrored in the wilderness of the forest, could heal the White man and colonial wounds.

After a long journey of persecution and banishment by colonizers, followed by prohibitionist drug policies, we can observe the spread of ayahuasca rituals throughout Europe and North America, and along with this, a huge expansion in the scientific study of ayahuasca. This vine has definitely become an interest of the academic world, and seems to be here to stay.

In the words of Brazilian historian Henrique Carneiro, as telescopes are to astronomy and microscopes to biology, psychedelic drugs represent the primary techno-scientific tool of knowledge of the mind. I think it is safe to say that we are co-protagonists in the largest event ever about ayahuasca. There will be one community forum, five films, and more than 30 presentations. The Track is also going to launch the book *Ayahuasca and Health*.

Our Track is multidisciplinary. It includes perspectives from the disciplines of neuroscience, neurobiology, psychiatry, pharmacology, ethnopharmacology, ethnobotany, psychology, public health, epidemiology, anthropology, law, and education. Presenters have come from Brazil, the USA, Canada, Germany, Spain, Peru, and Mexico.

The main focus of the Ayahuasca Track is on the therapeutic potential of ayahuasca. Presentations will explore the ritual and clinical uses of this substance in the treatment and management of various diseases and ailments, especially its role in psychological well being, quality of life, and in shaping identity. They will particularly address ayahuasca's promising potentials as an adjunct to psychotherapy for substance dependence, and in some cases for depression and PTSD.

The biomedical and psychological research presented in the track ranges from neurophysiological aspects of visions to the use of neuroscience tools to compare dream states and psychedelic states; from the psychological evaluation of ayahuasca drinkers to investigation of

long term effects on mental health, potential side effects, toxicity, and interaction with antidepressants and mental disorders.

Health, illness, and curing are analyzed through the lens of anthropology as well, particularly in religious and shamanic settings. The track investigates the boundaries between shamanism, religion, and medicine, examining hybridization across the diverse knowledge bases of ayahuasca practices. Our collaborators do not avoid controversial topics, such as the role of economics, cultural and ritual translations, ayahuasca tourism, sexual abuse, ethics, legal pluralism and religious freedom.

We hope that the Ayahuasca Track helps to legitimize the scientific study of ayahuasca, and encourages more researchers to study this topic. We have contracted with Springer Publishing to produce a book out of this conference, "The Therapeutic Use of Ayahuasca."

In sum, it is a true joy to unite the top experts of the world on this topic with the global ayahuasca-drinking community in a congenial California atmosphere. Welcome to our world of researchers, friends, kin, enemies, active principles, ancestors, non-humans, plantspirits, and molecules. I hope you will come join us in the Ayahuasca Track to discuss the nature of this hallucinogen-religious sacrament-medicinal plant-magical potion and its incredible potential to shed light onto the nature of the mind, body, and spirit.

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