

# Review: “Ayahuasca Shamanism in the Amazon and Beyond” by Beatriz Caiuby Labate & Clancy Cavnar

By Gerhard Mayer

Institut für Grenzgebiete der Psychologie und Psychohygiene, Freiburg

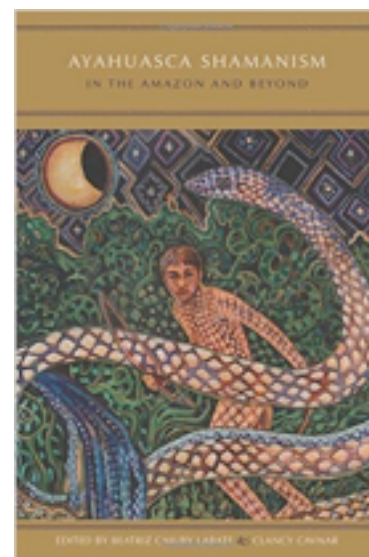
Ayahuasca shamanism is a term for a specific form of shamanism which is performed by indigenous and mestizo shamans of the Amazon region using the psychoactive concoction ayahuasca, and which has attracted increasing attention by western tourists over the last years.<sup>2</sup> By now I have read several books on the issue of ayahuasca, and some of them I also reviewed (Mayer 2010; 2013); but this anthology, compiled by Beatriz Caiuby Labate and Clancy Cavnar, impressed me in a particular way. It is characterized by a sensible composition of individual contributions which result, in an overall view, in a dense, multifaceted, and compelling picture of the present situation of ayahuasca shamanism and its development trajectories. Moreover, it describes the complex situation which emerges with the encountering of indigenous culture, its urbanized forms, western researchers (primarily anthropologists), and western tourists. The subjects covered by the chapters of the book are all concerned with ayahuasca shamanism as a core issue but they point much further, however, by dealing with the relations between indigenous/native shamans and western visitors in general. Thereby, numerous problems resulting from mutual misunderstandings, projections, and idealization are addressed. Each of the chapters deconstructs images and ideas which, since the 1960ies, have been developed in western people's minds around the ayahuasca complex, its alleged rootedness in an ancient tradition, as an embodiment of authentic, primeval nature wisdom.

In addition to a foreword by Oscar Calavia Saéz (“Authentic Ayahuasca”) as well as introductory „Notes on the Expansion and Reinvention of Ayahuasca Shamanism“ by the two editors and social anthropologist Françoise Barbira Freedman, – both are texts worth reading – the anthology contains 11 chapters which cover a broad range of topics of the meeting between natives and westerners from different perspectives. The first two chapters deal directly with the “invented tradition” of ayahuasca use in ethnic groups. Medical anthropologist Glenn H. Shepard Jr. („Will the Real Shaman Please Stand Up?“) shows how two groups which traditionally didn't know ayahuasca as a brew consisting of a specific combination of two psychotropic plants, i.e. the Amazonian vine *Banisteriopsis caapi* and a DMT-containing plant like *Psychotria viridis*, came in touch with this beverage in the end of the 1950s (the one group), and in mid-1980s respectively (the other group), and adopted it to their tradition in different ways. Because of its potency and efficacy, even traditionally used shaman plants have thereafter been replaced to some degree. Social scientist Mariana Ciavatta Pantoja's („Kuntanawa“) article is concerned with the identity-forming function of ayahuasca for the Kuntanawa people, demonstrating how creative they use their tradition, culture, and ethnicity. In the third chapter, the Finnish researcher in Latin American studies, Pirjo Kristiina Virtanen, portrays how ayahuasca shamanism

causes new alliances of various indigenous groups but also of indigenous, urban, and white shamans (‘gringo shamans’); thereby, questions of power as well as indigene identity are also reformulated. In chapter 4, the anthropologists Esther Jean Langdon and Isabel Santana de Rose address a similar issue, a “medicine alliance” which is formed by a network of Guarani, an indigenous ethnic group from the south of Brazil (and other South American countries), Santo Daime (an ayahuasca religion), and the Sacred Fire of Itzachilatlan, a religious association which is strongly oriented on the native customs of North American natives. Here again, it becomes apparent how rituals, sacred artefacts, and substances have been exchanged, and new ritual formations and traditions have been created. Primordially, ayahuasca has only been used by Santo Daime, and unknown to the other two parts of the alliance. In view of such developments, the authors note:

Western perceptions of shamanism tend to seek the primordial shaman, emphasizing an essential connection with the past. This past, constructed as timeless, primordial, and mythical, represents shamanism as a stagnated cultural form. However, modern ethnographies show that shamanisms today must be understood in light of the interethnic context in which indigenous peoples are inserted. Shamanisms are situated historically and constitute dynamic systems of knowledge and practices that are negotiated and renegotiated in contexts where diverse cultural actors are in dialogue. (p. 98)

Such meetings and interactions of foreign cultures are not always characterized by mutual understanding; successful encounters can even rely on systematic misunderstanding. This is demonstrated in an impressive manner by anthropologist Anne-Marie Losonczy and social scientist Silvia Mesturini Cappelletti with her contribution “Ritualized Misunderstanding Between Uncertainty, Agreement, and Rupture” (chap. 5). The authors identified three main fields of essential misunderstanding which form



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settings of successful communication. The first one concerns the aim to cope with situations of uncertainty. The search for a way out of uncertainty is common to both, westerners and natives, but is it propelled by an *epistemic* doubt with the latter, and by an *ontological* doubt with the former. For natives, uncertainty is related to the identity and intentions of the encountered beings as well as the meaning of the encounters. The 'plant teacher' ayahuasca is sought to provide insight and clarification. Westerners, by contrast, are driven by the question whether there is a world 'on the other side', whether spirits 'really' exist etc. They try to reduce, or remove, their uncertainty with regard to their (new and/or alternative) worldview. The second field of misunderstanding is concerned with the understanding of, and dealing with, illness and diseases where a psychological-animistic concept (diseases are caused by emotional traumas or psychological blocks) is in opposition to a spiritualist concept (diseases are caused by sorcery or conflicts with the spiritual realm). The third field of ritualized misunderstanding concerns the legitimation of the shaman. For westerners, it depends primarily on his local (indigenous) origin or initiation as well as on his moral and spiritual motivation. However, in a native perspective legitimation depends primarily on shamanic power which is reflected in access to a western clientele, and the related economic and social advantages. Envy between local shamans and the resulting 'magic wars' do not fit with the above mentioned western understanding. For the authors, ayahuasca is a kind of mediating third party because it is providing a ritualized framework in which it is jointly consumed by natives (shamans) and westerners, in which it produces experiences and contents (images, visions etc.) which are understood as communication of supernatural entities, and which become objects of shared communication. The authors remark:

Multi-sited ethnography has shown that, no matter how different the speech and practices surrounding ayahuasca may be, this beverage seems to function as a ritual device capable of opening a relational field that allows people who were previously spatially separated to meet and interact in a common ritual frame while remaining culturally and socially distinct. This meeting stimulates a process of communication and exchange that rests on ritually framed mutual misunderstandings that create, time and time again, the perception of a mutual agreement, expressed in shared ritual action. (p. 125-126)

With the chapter "Shaman's Networks in Western Amazonia. The Iquitos-Nauta Road", social anthropologist Françoise Barbira Freedman deals with several changes caused by ayahuasca tourism in the western Amazonian region as well as with the tradition of shamanic networks. A 75 kilometers long road plays an important role connecting the Peruvian cities Iquitos and Nauta which crosses almost perfectly straight through the jungle, and without turnoffs: a lot of native shamans have taken up residence along this road, and built ayahuasca lodges to offer ceremonies for tourists. The road itself builds a demarcation line of 'civilization' and jungle, but also of local and transnational shamanism. Freedman called it a "transformative mixed-contact zone" (p.

138) because various forms of involvement in ayahuasca shamanism meet there whereby the categories are rather fluid: identities can change, local shamans can become "international" ones, "gringos" can become "gringo shamans" or mediators between westerners and natives etc. The author also emphasizes the resulting situation of envy and competition between shamans with its negative effects (e.g. accusations of sorcery, misuse of power, offering 'bad' ayahuasca).

In her dissertation, cultural anthropologist Evgenia Fotiou investigated ayahuasca tourists. She interviewed 82 persons during 2003-2007 asking about their motives, needs, and wishes which brought them to travel to Peru. Her findings are included in the book chapter "On the Uneasiness of Tourism. Considerations on Shamanic Tourism in Western Amazonia" (chap. 7). She cites four main reasons: (1) self-exploration and spiritual growth, (2) curiosity, (3) physical and emotional healing, and (4) the desire for vacation in an exotic location (p. 163). But she could not find any patterns in age, class, education, or social status; however, with regard to gender she found more than twice as many men as women in her sample who attended ayahuasca ceremonies (p. 161). She suggested that this gender difference might be explained by a higher willingness to take risks among men as well as greater challenges and inconveniences women are exposed to when travelling through South American countries. Surprisingly, many of the participants of ayahuasca ceremonies did not have any experiences with other hallucinogenic drugs before. For many of them, the wish for authenticity, for a connection to an archaic past, as well as for direct access to spirituality and the sacred is a key desire. Meanwhile, the shamans know these needs and wishes very well: they choose their outfit and design their ceremonies according to the ideas and composition of the participants. The author calls this "performance of 'authenticity'" (p. 169). She abstains from one-sided criticism and offers a differentiated picture by identifying threats and misunderstandings, however, not seeing shamanic tourism as an anomaly.

With the chapter "The Internationalization of Peruvian Vegetalismo", social anthropologist Beatriz Caiuby Labate, who is one of the editors of the anthology, presents a well-informed overview of various processes of change which the Peruvian ayahuasca tradition (*vegetalismo*) is subjected to since the increase of international interest. Keywords are: psychologization of ayahuasca experiences, retraditionalization, which means emphasizing a connection with (allegedly) ancient, and sometimes foreign, traditions (see above: "performance of authenticity"), formalization, systematization and ritualization of ceremonies and other offerings – and all this to meet the imagination of international visitors; however, concepts of western science and medicine made, and still make, a contribution to the processes of transformation. In the meantime, ayahuasca has been recognized as national cultural heritage of Peru, and to some extent has an identity-building effect. Labate notes in her conclusion:

"The internationalization of ayahuasca can be seen as a multidirectional process, 'from the forest to the city,' and likewise in reverse, 'from the city to the forest.' International networks have emerged in which subjects, substances, capital, images, and 'sacred techniques' circulate." (p. 199).

Ethnomusicologist Bernd Brabec de Mori presents a very special perspective with his contribution “From the Native’s Point of View. How Shipibo-Konibo Experience and Interpret Ayahuasca Drinking with ‘Gringos’” (chap. 9). He married a Shipibo woman, and has become part of the Shipibo community, an ethnic group in the Amazon rain forest in Peru. The Shipibo-Konibo people have been very important for the western idea of ayahuasca shamanism by using so-called *icaros*, medicine chants, which are sung during ayahuasca sessions, as well as by their particular aesthetic use of patterns on pottery, and other artisan craftwork as well as in face paintings. These formal patterns have become synonymous for indigenous groups using ayahuasca. As an insider and part of the social group he reports of the attitude of native people towards western visitors, gringos, which is not characterized by ‘performance of authenticity’, and which may be somewhat disillusioning for several visitors. As an inhabitant of both worlds, he gains insight into mutual misunderstandings as well as conceptions distorted by projections and idealization. Most Shipibo, for instance, “do not distinguish between tourists, researchers, and ‘apprentice shamans.’ They all ask apparently similar questions, take photos all day long, and wish to explore the ayahuasca experience” (p. 209). All of them are thought to make a lot of money but behave, in the eyes of indigenous people, very naïve. Most of the ayahuasca tourists are considered drug addicts, and that is why they are searching for ayahuasca experiences. Anthropologists, shaman apprentices, and tourists who take photos and audio recordings, and who buy ritual items or other artifacts would make a lot of money with them in their own countries, thereby exploiting the Shipibo people. But this attitude towards the gringos is of great ambiguity because they are also attractive due to significant economic benefits for individual families who come into closer contact. Moreover, the new ayahuasca ceremonies were created within the ritual framework of ayahuasca tourism. They may, as the author writes, “well substitute for former rituals that are nowadays lost” (p. 224). He concludes:

Apparently, this new ritual serves for performing and (re-)creating the cosmos for both the visitors (including their audiences in their home countries) and the Shipibo. Shipibo people seem to be in need of a new performance of their positionality as an animist society that now is merging with the globalizing Northern (naturalistic) ontology. (p. 225)

With Chapter 10 („Ayahuasca’s Attractions and Distractions“), cultural anthropologist Daniela Pelusa addresses an important issue which unfortunately has made negative headlines in recent years: the relationship of ayahuasca and sexuality in connection with ayahuasca tourism. Here, too, intercultural misunderstandings come into effect. On the one hand, the indigenous concept of sexuality, and of adequate sexual behavior, is based on a worldview in which one can shift between different realities, and human identity as well as agency is seen as much more fluid than in a western secular conception. The demand for sexual abstinence as a part of the shamanic diet is based on this (at least in part). In a tourist setting, this aspect of dieting, and of abstinence, is omitted to a large extent. Shamans as well as shaman’s assistants are in a hierarchic position of power, and some of them take advantage of it for sexual harassment and abuse against the will of female participants. This, for itself, has little to do with an intercultural

misunderstanding, and is – unfortunately – a relatively frequent occurrence in similar hierarchical situations. However, the author points also to a “mismatched gender code” (p. 245) which can play a crucial, and problematic, role in this context. She notes:

“To circumvent vulnerability, indigenous women avoid smiling directly at men, laughing with them, paying too much attention to them, being in their presence without close kin nearby, and traveling alone. Not coincidentally, these precautions prescriptively describe most nonlocal female ayahuasca participants, particularly if they openly esteem the shaman, converse and laugh freely, are unhindered by local customs, and travel alone.” (pp. 244-245)

Native men obtain their idea of western women mainly by watching films in cinema, and perceive them as independent, permissive, and driven by sexual desires. Certainly, sexual abuse of female ayahuasca tourists, and other inappropriate behavior, is generally disapproved – by the tourists themselves as well as by the local people. But indigenous women have an advantage: “Yet, whereas Amazonian women tend to view shamans as humans who can potentially be abusive, uninformed Western women do not” (p. 250).

The last chapter entitled “Yage-Related Neo-Shamanism in Colombian Urban Contexts”, and authored by social anthropologist Alhena Caicedo Fernández focusses on the situation in Columbia where new forms of ayahuasca (= yage) usage have evolved. Such ceremonies are not held in the jungle area or on the demarcation line between jungle and ‘civilization’ (as on the Iquitos-Nauta road – see above) but in urban contexts. These neo-shamanic approaches refer to indigenous yage shamanism, and maintain this connection, although they have found their own forms by integrating therapeutic as well as religious aspects. Similar to ayahuasca religions (Santo Daime, União de Vegetal etc.), catholic elements are sometimes integrated, for instance, and the participants of the yage sessions are not visitors from far away Europe or North America but local people.

My overall judgment of the volume can easily be deduced from the detailed presentations of the individual chapters. The articles show a high degree of reflexivity as well as self-reflexivity which goes along with an important, for some people in some respects probably painful deconstruction – a deconstruction not only of ideas of ayahuasca, ayahuasca shamanism, and ayahuasca tourism, but also of concepts and projections of authenticity, tradition, nativeness, and ahistoricity as well as of successful transcultural understanding. The book extends far beyond a specific interest in the ayahuasca complex. It is inspiring, thought-provoking, and eye-opening. This anthology provided by the two editors is a laudable project. By the way: it is a remarkable and very pleasant fact that 12 of the 14 authors involved are females who contributed to this dense and nuanced scholarly work!

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