

It's all you! Australian ayahuasca drinking, spiritual development, and immunitary individualism

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Abstract

Ayahuasca, a psychoactive plant decoction, has spread from indigenous communities in South America to urban areas in the Americas, Europe, and Australia where it is used in neoshamanic rituals. This paper draws on ethnography of Australian ayahuasca ceremonies to examine the ways that individualism shapes the structure of ayahuasca rituals, the interpretation of visionary experiences, and notions of spiritual development. I show how the metaphors that Australian drinkers involved in this study use to understand their ayahuasca experiences and spiritual development reflect a form of immunitary individualism, which is premised on the negation of difference and relationality. Secular disenchantment and a culture of narcissism may drive people to seek ayahuasca, but transcendence is interpreted in terms of an expansive, non-relational self. In this sense, neoshamanic ayahuasca culture may be an escape from *and* reproduction of the culture of narcissism associated with the malaise of modernity.

Keywords

Ayahuasca, spirituality, individualism, immunitary self, neoshamanism

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Ayahuasca, a psychoactive plant decoction made from *Banisteriopsis caapi* and admixture plants, has spread from indigenous communities in the Amazon to urban areas in the Americas, Europe, and Australia. The contexts of its use range from shamanic ceremonies to syncretic churches to the pursuit of mystical experience. Several studies have examined ayahuasca rituals within the context of church ceremonies in Brazil, the U.S., and Europe (e.g. Blainey, 2013; Dawson, 2013; Groisman, 2001). A number of studies have addressed the rise of 'ayahuasca tourism', where Westerners seek out 'jungle trips' with indigenous or mestizo shamans in Peru, Brazil, Ecuador, and Colombia (e.g. Dobkin De Rios, 2006; Razam, 2013; Winkelman, 2005). Shamans from South America also travel to perform ayahuasca ceremonies in Europe, Australia, and North America (Tupper, 2009). In Australia, however, most ayahuasca drinking occurs in ceremonies organised by Australian neoshamans or 'facilitators' who combine elements from Amazonian rituals with new therapeutic modalities, a variety of spiritual strains, and aspects of transpersonal or psycholytic therapy (Scuro and Rodd, 2015). Participants in neoshamanic rituals in Australia, like those of Europe and North America, come from a wide variety of backgrounds, ranging from medical professionals to teachers, students, entrepreneurs, the police, and policy advisors (Faber and Groot, 2007; Winkelman, 2005). The ceremonies employ ritual and pharmacological methods to facilitate visionary experiences, and they are utilised by people seeking spiritual, emotional, or psychological healing or growth.

During 2010–2012 I participated in a number of ayahuasca ceremonies in Perth, Northern New South Wales and Townsville, and interviewed dozens of people from these areas, as well as Melbourne, Cairns, and Adelaide, about their experiences drinking ayahuasca in Australia. According to my own estimate derived at in discussion with ayahuasca drinkers on the East and West coasts, there are roughly 1000 Australians who drink ayahuasca regularly who one enthusiast referred to as 'the tribe'. From this core of 1000 people, we can imagine networks of relationships spanning outwards involving friends of the tribespeople and other people who drink occasionally. The tribe is largely constituted by centripetal relationships to a handful of people who have organised ayahuasca rituals in Australia for up to 20 years. Each of these facilitators, and people who drink with them, could be seen as constituting sub-tribes, which evolve as facilitators learn from other Australians or do pilgrimages to South America to deepen their knowledge with people considered to be knowledgeable shamans there. Knowledge of and plans to visit authentic and ethical, as opposed to dodgy or sham, shamans in Ecuador and Peru, were regular topics of conversation at ceremonies. Participants were keen to share knowledge about good or bad shaman experiences they had had in South America, and many of these good or bad, powerful or sham shaman experiences gravitated around a mestizo, Peruvian, Shipibo-Conibo inspired but syncretic and now globalised 'vegetalismo' (Luna, 1986). I knew some of the people participating in or organising ayahuasca ceremonies prior to commencing this research, having met them at psychedelic science and culture conferences where I had presented work on the indigenous use of Amazonian psychoactive substances. Some of the

interviewees are also friends I have known for many years. This familiarity opened doors for me, but also posed challenges in terms of balancing a desire to let the voices of the participants come through in their own terms while also developing a critique of the ways that dominant cultural forces influence ayahuasca subculture.

Despite being a relatively fringe cultural practice in Australia, the warp and weft of ayahuasca drinking is informed by dominant, taken for granted cultural values generally, and notions of spirituality and health in particular. Alternative therapies and ‘holistic’ health are often advertised as involving relations of ‘mind–body–spirit’. However, this triad reduces to the level of an individual sheared of socio-cultural contexts (Baer and Coulter, 2008). Likewise, the notion of ‘spirit’ at stake in spiritual growth is tied to a larger cosmology in which individuality is premised on the negation of difference and culture. In the neoliberal age, practices and concepts relating to spirituality have proliferated. The rise of individualist religious movements based on notions of spirituality has been interpreted as a reaction to disenchantment with materialism and formal religions, as an answer to the ‘spiritual void’ left by modernity, and as evidence of an emerging, globalised spiritual consciousness (Luna, 2003; Mabit 2007; Metzner, 1999; Townsend, 2005; Tupper, 2009). Others have seen a turn to mysticism as a retreat from the political (Zizek, 2011).

Psychologised notions of spirituality have become normalised in a world where the entrepreneurial individual is ontologically central, and in which neuroscience and the brain have significantly displaced sociology and the social, and psychoanalysis and the mind, as frameworks for interpreting human being (De Vos and Pluth, 2016; Rose and Abi-Rached, 2013). Malabou’s (2008) work on plasticity shows how neoliberal ideology has seeped into the Cartesian divide between brain and consciousness. The notion of neural plasticity, which could be equally associated with creativity or flexibility, has come to reproduce the values of the networked economy that requires compliance in the name of creativity (Benson and Kirsch, 2010; Boltanski and Chiapello, 2007). Plasticity, Malabou argues, is not conceived of in terms of creativity, the ability to create new psychological or social realities, but in terms of flexibility. Flexibility involves adapting to pre-existing forms, not bringing new forms into existence. It is in terms analogous to these that we can understand the contradictions inherent in notions of spirituality and individual growth relating to ayahuasca drinking in Australia, and the indirect but not inconsequential ways that immunitarian individualism seeps into participants’ interpretations of their ayahuasca experiences. Spiritual growth is premised on a notion of personal transformation, but possibility for transformation is contained by an immunitarian sense of self that negates the creative possibility of difference. In this way, while spiritual development is seen as a relativistic, individual journey, possibilities for individualised plasticity are also patterned.

While anthropological analyses of psychedelic use focused on indigenous peoples in the 1970s, the current literature on the globalisation of ayahuasca has tended to emphasise either medical potential, use in syncretic Churches, or Euro-American tourism and neoshamanism (e.g. Labate and Cavnar, 2014a;

Labate et al., 2017). The shift from indigenous to European and American peoples has been accompanied by a move to emphasise the cultural relativity of ayahuasca rather than intra- or cross-cultural similarities. Early studies had demonstrated commonalities in visionary motifs among indigenous Amazonian peoples (e.g. Harner, 1973; Reichel-Dolmatoff, 1972) and between Amazonian indigenous and urban Western populations (e.g. Naranjo, 1973). Shanon's (2002) recent study of ayahuasca phenomenology, drawing on over 3500 experiences from ayahuasca drinkers on four continents, is a significant outlier in establishing parameters of experiential commonality rather than a relativity. The relativisation of ayahuasca may be tied to a political agenda among anthropologists to legitimise (and legalise) the use of ayahuasca outside of indigenous contexts, while simultaneously discrediting the made for sale shamanic traditions of ayahuasca tourism. In the process of legitimising the right to create new Western traditions and delegitimising the construction of authenticity, however, the specificity of indigenous frameworks for using psychoactive substances is disappeared. What is also forgotten in the transition from indigenous to Western-oriented studies of ayahuasca, however, is the way that dominant ideology shapes ritual and the interpretation of visions. While anthropologists understood Amazonian ayahuasca use as embedded in specific cultural traditions and normative structures, it now appears that the visions of urban, Euro-American drinkers are somehow culture- and ideology-free. In a bloodless counter-revolutionary revolution, the relativisation of culture has disappeared the politics of culture, and politics tout court.

The field of ayahuasca research is also characterised by an almost born again faith in the beauty and potential of ayahuasca. Unlike the anthropology of Christianity, which is practised by many anthropologists who are not Christian, the anthropology of ayahuasca drinking is characterised by an exceptionally high degree of personal commitment to the cause. In part, this relates to the legal precarity of ayahuasca drinking and the active support of anthropologists in several countries for legalisation (e.g. Anderson et al., 2012; Labate, 2011). To be sure, there have been a number of studies and news reports highlighting the dangers, particularly to women, in drinking ayahuasca with unscrupulous 'false shamans' servicing Euro-American thirst for spiritual experience (Dobkin de Rios and Rumrill, 2008; Monroe, 2017). Ayahuasca may be a wonderful medicine of the spirit, and a mechanism for allowing beings of the earth to find a harmonious path through the Anthropocene as some profess (Anonymous, 2012). Ayahuasca might also be useful for helping people overcome depression, addiction, and other 'diseases of civilisation', as a number of medical studies indicate (e.g. Frecska et al., 2016; Labate and Cavnar, 2014b). However, this does not make the cultural forms that ayahuasca drinking takes immune to some of the same ills that have produced the awesome destruction and suffering of our age. It is at this juncture between an anthropology that has been somewhat beholden to ayahuasca's rapture, and the ways that dominant ideologies filter into spiritual practice, that I situate this paper.

This project was originally motivated by two main goals: to map out the cultural terrain of ayahuasca drinking in Australia, the degree to which centres and

peripheries of ritual practice could be identified; and to explore notions of health and healing associated with ayahuasca drinking. However, what struck me most in conversation with the drinkers I spoke to was an overlap between the tropes of spiritual growth and an immunitarian individualism that reflected rather than challenged dominant cultural values. This paper critically considers the ways that individualist ideology shapes notions of spiritual development, Australian ayahuasca ceremonies, and the interpretation of visionary experiences. I argue that transcendence and spiritual growth are interpreted as inward expansion of the self in a way that reinforces individualist ideology. I show how the metaphors that the Australian drinkers I worked with use to understand their ayahuasca experiences and spiritual development reflect a form of immunitary individualism, which is premised on the negation of difference and relationality. First, I draw on ethnography of Australian ayahuasca drinking to discuss the relationship between the structure of ceremonies and the shaping of individualist narratives. Second, I explore the ways that drinkers conceive of self-development by examining three emic concepts: ayahuasca as ‘mirror of the soul’, the ayahuasca experience as ‘polishing the crystal of the mind’, and the idea that ayahuasca awakens an expansive ‘higher self’. I argue that spiritual development here is akin to the development of an expanded, immunitarian individualism. Third, I consider notions of individualism associated with ayahuasca ceremonies in relation to Taylor’s (1989, 1991, 2007) discussion of the malaise of modernity, Napier’s (2003) notion of the auto-immunological self, and Esposito’s (2011, 2013) concept of ‘immunitas’. I conclude by suggesting that Australian ayahuasca drinking might have both palliative and iatrogenic properties with respect to the malaise of modernity. Secular disenchantment and a culture of narcissism may drive people to seek transcendence in ayahuasca experiences, but transcendent experience is understood in ways that reproduce immunitarian individualism. There is no singular ‘Australian ayahuasca culture’, and the argument I present applies to the contexts that I am familiar with, which nonetheless include a range of practitioners and perspectives from different cities around the country.

Facilitating individualism: Australian ayahuasca ceremonies

Some ayahuasca enthusiasts I worked with refer to themselves as ‘neoshamans’ but the term ‘facilitator’ is the most commonly used word in Australia to describe people who host and guide ayahuasca ceremonies. Facilitators are described as being more or less ‘hands on’ in terms of how rigidly they choreograph events, how regulated or minimalist the ritual process is, but there is a general pattern to proceedings. I provide an ethnographic sketch of a ceremony held at a community hall in Northern New South Wales in order to illustrate some of the general features of Australian ayahuasca ceremonies.

I arrived late up a winding road to a large house tucked in the forest, and parked in a clearing where I meet a couple who had also just arrived. I headed to the house, passing a wood shed where two men were still cooking off some

of the evening's brew. The house had a decaying splendour, and the story I heard was that it was once a party house built by a playboy Moroccan drug dealer. A cluster of people were talking on a deck outside, while others were preparing comfortable spaces for themselves on the floor of a large, wooden-clad lounge room. There were just under 30 people, an average sized group for the ceremonies I have attended, and about as many as could fit round the periphery of the room without bumping into each other. I went to sit in a corner where there appeared to be an unoccupied space, and was unpacking my cushioning when a middle-aged man entered the room and told me that it was imperative he sit in the corner. 'I need to sit there. We've already decided this. The forces have to be balanced. You can't just sit anywhere!' Apparently, it had been worked out by the organisers that four pre-selected presences would anchor the ceremonial space by sitting in each of the corners. The event was facilitated by four people who shared responsibility for preparing and administering the brew and setting the ritual space and was a replacement ceremony for one cancelled when two Peruvian shamans were denied a tourist visa by the Australian government. Usually, there is only one facilitator who may be assisted by one or two helpers. The facilitator is responsible for providing and distributing the brew and for setting the mood through lighting, song, and music. 'Helpers' are experienced drinkers and in the context of travelling facilitators may be responsible for booking or organising venues and other logistics for the ceremony. While everyone present seemed to know at least one other person, no one knew everyone present. This combination of familiarity and novelty speaks also to the lability of ayahuasca experience, where even regular drinkers can be surprised by the direction that *la madre ayahuasca* takes them. Some people came to drink ayahuasca for the first time, others were returning to it after a long break, and there were several regular drinkers. Two-thirds of the participants were female, and the ages ranged from early 20s to early 60s. A gong was rung, participants encouraged to get comfortable, and basic house rules were introduced.

If you need to go to the toilet, don't linger there, and don't go wandering around outside. Return to the circle as quickly as you can. Stay present, stay seated, and please don't talk during the ceremony. If you need help or are really struggling, then Jo will help you up and escort you out. But you need to try to stay present and work through it.

We were issued with a bucket to vomit into and a toilet roll to clean ourselves with, which a handful of people ended up needing later on. Towards one corner of the room was a small bookshelf turned into an altar that had a mix of ritual paraphernalia including feathers, clusters of 'mapacho' tobacco and sage brush, a little Buddha, a Shipibo geometric patterned textile, guitar, amulets, and freshly cut flowers. Some other participants, including a man training to be a facilitator who had recently returned from Peru, also had little clusters of ritual objects by around them. One by one, participants were called on to share their 'intention' with the group, which served as an introduction. Some people wanted to build on

insights they had gained in previous ayahuasca experiences, others sought healing or guidance from *la madre ayahuasca*. A woman from Sydney said she wanted to explore the feminine energy of ayahuasca by being ‘invaginated’. ‘It’s the experience of being swallowed into *la madre’s* warm folds’. One of the facilitators went round the room and cleansed each participant by shaking burning sage brush around them and blowing out and away from the body. ‘Phewit! Phewit!’ Smoke lingered as the lights were turned off, and one by one people came to the altar to receive a small cup of ayahuasca. Before receiving their cup, each participant placed their hands together in thanks and reverence. The brew was black, viscous, and sweet like molasses but finished bitter and threatened to repeat. This particular brew mixed Peruvian and Australian *B. Caapi*, Peruvian *Psychotria viridis*, and Australian *Acacia* sp. plant material and, as I was told later, no one really knew what to expect from this combination. After about 40 minutes, a second round of the brew was offered to anyone who wanted it, and for the next 4 hours the room alternated between periods of relative silence broken by a cough, a wretch, a moan, or a laugh, and periods where individual journeys were modulated by the flow of song. Several people had learned *icaros*, songs designed specifically to be sung during ayahuasca visions, and would initiate song while others were encouraged to ‘find their voice’ in this ceremony, as in others I attended.

Music is an important element of ayahuasca rituals and is understood to help people to move through their visionary experiences. Some facilitators are gifted musicians who sing or play instruments during ceremonies, while others play recorded music of various styles, including ayahuasca folk songs performed in Australia, Peru, or Brazil (some of which have been translated from Spanish and Portuguese into English). One relatively junior facilitator explained the ad hoc process of learning to become a facilitator:

We are babes in the woods. We think we are doing this work, doing these circles, making medicine with little or no training. If we do have some training it is still only basic because we haven’t grown up in an indigenous culture where this is like walking down to the shops or going to the pub, or whatever it would be in our cultural reference points.

Several of the facilitators involved in this study have spent time in Peru working with one or more shamans over varying periods of time, and many other Australians make pilgrimages to the Peruvian Amazon, either beginning their drinking there and continuing in Australia, or as a means of indeed getting a dose of authenticity. Australian ayahuasca ceremonies draw on an eclectic mix of elements, but this is not to say that all elements are of equal weight. As one person put it: ‘The general export coming from Peru at the moment is a mestizo, hybrid, Shipibo... that’s the general stream coming through to Australia... then there is the Brazilian Daime church... they do a great service’.

There is a sense of pride among some facilitators that Australian ayahuasca ceremonies are ‘home-grown’, both in terms of the cultural influences and botanical matter that they are based on. Australian ayahuasca mixes frequently involve the use of native *Acacia* species plants in lieu of or in combination with *P. viridis*, or harmala alkaloid-rich *Peganum harmala* seeds in lieu of or in combination with either Australian grown or imported *B. caapi*. Ayahuasca decoctions involving Australian-grown plant material are referred to as ‘aussiehuasca’, and result in the phrase ‘we’re doing it Aussie style’, a nod to Australian ayahuasca ceremonies being less referential to South American traditions than their North American or European counterparts. An experienced facilitator who advocates the exploration of ‘aussiehuasca’ sees the latter as having fewer ritual constraints imposed on the participants, and links anti-traditionalism and egalitarianism as cultural values that come through in the emergence of Australian rituals.

I would definitely say that the European culture is completely different to the Australian [ayahuasca] culture. I would say that the Australian aya culture is a bit more non-traditional, less referential to the South American culture. Tends to not be so strict or formalised. . . My understanding about Europe is that people get so hung up about authenticity that ultimately no one is authentic enough so you have a lot of charlatans, people who claim authenticity. . . but to really get good at South American shamanism takes years and years. . . with 20 years immersed in that culture.

This facilitator emphasises the ritual looseness of Australian ayahuasca ceremonies in relation to those held in Europe. He is a pragmatist and a veteran consciousness cosmonaut. His ritual style is hands-off and draws on a minimum of New Age spiritual influences and a maximum of botanical and pharmacological knowledge. Other participants I spoke to said they preferred the ‘non-religious’ Australian ceremonies to those of the Santo Daime church they had attended because the latter involved ‘too many rules’.

A diversity of styles and influences is reflected in ayahuasca ceremonies in Australia, and in the backgrounds of each facilitator. Informal social networks, online forums, psychedelic, spiritual conferences, and music festivals connect facilitators and keen drinkers based in different regions in the country. While there is no formal control hierarchy or system of spiritual hegemony, not all voices are equal, and some have been around longer to influence more people, either by taking on apprentice facilitators or simply by the popularity of their ceremonies and relative standing among peers. While not hegemonic, certain tendencies have come to the fore.

One basic commonality is the expectation that each participant takes a certain amount of responsibility for their own ayahuasca experience or ‘journey’, rather than relying on the direct guidance of or dialogue with a shaman, other participants, or spirits. ‘Holding space’ is a critical responsibility of the facilitators of ayahuasca ceremonies. Facilitators ‘hold space’ for the other participants to have

‘more or less private introspective experiences’ (Gearin 2015:445; Gearin, 2016: 5). According to one ayahuasca drinker:

I think that what holding space is on a psychic level, an energetic level, to use that problematic word, is maintaining a certain kind of environment which is... the term I want to use, and I might need to explain is clean, a clean space. I think that you have to view this in light of the fact that the experience is telepathic for a lot of people, and what I mean by that is the energy, the emotional state of participants can be felt as a kind of average. And if a lot of people are having a really hard time, then you can pick up on that, and the job of the facilitator, by using music especially and there some other tools they’ve got, is to keep that kind of on a level so that people who are going through a difficult process can go through without polluting the emotional space of the other people.

There are physical and psychical or ‘energetic’ aspects to the act of ‘holding space’. Sitting upright, rather than lying down, is a physical prerequisite to ‘holding space’ and to staying focused on ‘doing the work’. In the share and care session following a ceremony, one participant thanked their neighbour for holding a strong space, emphasising their strong presence and straight posture.

I really gained strength from the way you were sitting beside me. Just your strong presence – strong position, and when I looked over at you I felt supported. Before last night I thought ‘How am I going to sit upright all night?’

Gearin (2016) uses the term ‘the politics of holding space’ to refer to the way that prescriptions against social interaction during ceremony allow multiple individuals to pursue their unfettered introspective self-discovery in the context of a room full of periodically moaning and vomiting people. Ceremonial space is reserved, during the time of intoxication, for private experience. While there is a great degree of attention paid to making a comfortable and supportive physical and social space, participants are encouraged to work through their issues on their own during the ceremony, and not to talk or to help others. ‘Holding space’ encourages individualised experiences and discourages social interaction and sharing or communication apart from a very constrained ‘statement of intent’ and sharing and caring session afterwards. The constrained social space, encouragement to ‘stay present’, hold space, and be respectful of fellow participants, encourages conformity to a group ethos and may act as a buffer against the possibility of spiritual fall out.

While Gearin (2016) sees an emphasis placed upon ‘individualised authority over the interpretation and meaning of personal revelations’ during the ‘sharing’ round of the ceremony, I witnessed a fair degree of homogeneity in the way people constructed narratives of their experiences, and in the way meaning was derived from those experiences. Perhaps this homogeneity owes in part to a process identified by Becker (1953) in relation to marijuana smokers. Becker argued that novice smokers learn to experience ‘being high’ as they gradually pick up and use the

terms used by more senior smokers to define this experience. In this way, 'being high' tends towards a homogenous significance rather than representing a diversity of experiences. In the case of ayahuasca ceremonies I attended, meaning tended to be inferred about moral possibilities and responsibilities in ways that could be slotted into a standardised, higher vibrational, personal development matrix. As one person I interviewed put it:

Ayahuasca is almost the thing that the New Age has been waiting for. It really ties together all the tenets of that religion. It gives them a mystical experience. It is a physical substance that is derived from a plant. The plant has, the material has, a history of use by indigenous people, and it comes from the rain forest. So this is the mass that the New Age church has been waiting for.

Indeed, since the 1980s anthropologists have been expressing an uneasiness about the way Amazonian shamanism has become a New Age form of supermarket spirituality (e.g. Brown, 1989). Recently, Fotiu (2016) provides a critique of the New Age construction of Peruvian indigenous shamanism, which is detached from understanding of its place in indigenous lifeworlds, and of the struggles for social justice that indigenous people in Peru face. The pressures of conforming to New Age cultural values, and of acquiring these values, however, are expressed here by this participant from Perth:

What bothers me is that there is a tendency towards really uncritical participation, and a growing dogmatism. I think that the New Age thing is a major contributor, and I suspect that the majority of people who get involved do so by word of mouth from a friend and are part of that very loose bunch of beliefs and practices we call the New Age. Even people interested in the psychotherapeutic side or trippers, it is a really good conversion ground for them to get sucked into the memes of new age religion, and it actually has been hard to avoid.

Each group has its own dynamic, but power relations among experienced and novice ayahuasca drinkers, and between those closest to the facilitator, shape the narratives that people produce about their experiences. Even though the facilitator does not elicit a particular type of vision from participants, narratives about experiences get sculpted by the group during a 'hyper-suggestible' state and afterwards in post-ceremony social settings. This process of shaping the interpretation of visionary experience according to local cultural expectations has been explored in a cross-cultural study by Grob and Dobkin de Rios (1992).

Here is an example of a 'care and share' session of a ceremony, when each participant is called on to share their visionary experiences with the rest of the group, where the experiences of a participant get shaped by the facilitator and others who offer suggestions as to how the participant should interpret his visions. The participant who recounts his interpretation emphasises the need to learn to trust (although he never specifies what or who), while the facilitator and others

emphasise that the spirit of ayahuasca is talking through him, and that the man should embrace the idea of ayahuasca ‘spirit’ as an extension of self.

Jacob: I had very strong visions. I got to a point where I was afraid to higher [raises hand up to above his head], and like before I feel that if I go further I will not be able to breathe – that’s my thing anyway, trusting, releasing from fear and from my body.
Facilitator: You have to let go, and the medicine, which is you, will guide you. It will breathe, and if you stop breathing you die [said half seriously in a laughing tone], so there is nothing to worry about.

Jacob: Yes, but I am a husband and a parent. It’s not just me. . . But I know that trust is what I have to work on – and that I have to integrate into my life, otherwise it is just a trip.

Diana: You don’t have to do anything. You are the medicine, and the medicine is you. It will guide you.

Jacob: [not sounding convinced] Well, I know this is what I have to work on. . .

There is sometimes a tension between the idea that ‘doing the work’ is entirely up to an individual whose visionary narrative and life is theirs to author, and a canalisation of thought coming from the sociocultural setting. Timothy Leary’s set and setting hypothesis states that ‘the primary determinants of a psychedelic experience are the internal set (intention, expectation, motivation) and the external setting or context [within which the experience takes place]’ (Metzner, 1999: 335). The specific ritual form provides a shared framework for anticipating and shaping experiences with ayahuasca. Within this distinction between set and setting, there is ample space for taken for granted cultural assumptions that support the status quo to shape the interpretation of experience. I suggest that an ideology of immunity individualism affects both the set and setting of Australian ayahuasca ceremonies. What is often facilitated is an individualistic experience in a group setting that tends to canalise the interpretation of experience along lines amenable to New Age spirituality that reinforces individualism. People are encouraged to develop their self not by relating to others or exploring an open-ended cosmos but by expanding and reinforcing one’s self inwardly. The ritual order of many Australian ayahuasca ceremonies encourages the pursuit of individual ends, personal insight, ‘healing’, and ‘spiritual growth’, in which the reference point is always the self and never a relationship. In a paradoxical situation, transcendence of the self is conceptualised in terms compatible with the negation of anything but a reinforced self. In the above example this involved the idea that the ayahuasca spirit is part of an extended or ‘higher’ self, a concept I explore in detail in the following section.

It is all you! Spiritual development as ego expansion

The articulation of ayahuasca experiences in terms of achieving ‘personal development’ and encountering one’s ‘higher self’ accords well with studies that have medicalised and quantified spirituality in a number of metrics (e.g. Faber and

Groot, 2007; Harris and Gurel, 2012; Lerner and Lyvers, 2006; Trichter et al., 2009; Winkelman, 2005). Interest in ayahuasca as a tool for personal or spiritual development follows from a tradition of psycholytic therapy and transpersonal psychology. Psycholytic therapy, which gained prominence in Europe after the Second World War, operated on the assumption that the 'psychic loosening' promoted by the ingestion of psychedelics could stimulate insight into previously unconscious emotional dynamics (Metzner, 1998). Knowledge of these emotional dynamics could then prompt resolution of inner conflicts and repressions. Stanislav Grof's (1998) work within the psycholytic paradigm resulted in an extended model of the human psyche, which may be indicative of the manner in which psychedelic substances facilitate transformative therapeutic insights. In addition to postnatal biography, Grof's (1998) 'new cartography of the psyche' includes the transbiographical realms of perinatal and transpersonal experiences. The perinatal domain of the psyche refers to the memories of birth and pre-birth which Grof (1998) found to be unlocked and relived during psychedelic experiences. The transpersonal domain of the psyche, meanwhile, accounts for experiential identifications with other people, animals, plants, archetypal or ancestral beings, and 'the universal mind or the void' (Grof, 1998: 345). Access to transpersonal domains can allow individuals to transcend the boundaries of ego and body and have healing and transformative effects for patients. The themes of transcendence, insight, and transformation are apparent in both Andritzky's (1989) and Grof's (1998) analysis of the healing potential of psychedelic experiences, as well as in interpretations of Amazonian shamanism.

By contrast, according to Znamenski (2007), the practice of modern Western shamanism tends to be defined more by individualism than by a commitment to relational modes of thought or self. The primacy of the individual is reflected in the idea that social transformation is only possible after the individual transforms their consciousness. Accordingly, it is no longer a matter of trying to change the world but of changing oneself as the precursor to any subsequent social change. Each 'journey' is celebrated as an individual act of discovery or growth. However, possibilities for achieving transpersonal experiences are constrained by the weight of ideologies implicit in the structure of ceremonies and in the interpretation of experiences. The structure of ceremonies limits possibility for social interaction beyond relatively constrained opportunities to share one's intent for drinking ayahuasca before the ceremony and one's experience afterwards. Light is dimmed or absent, speaking is prohibited, people are encouraged to shut their eyes and tune in to their own experience and away from any shared social dynamic. Talking or moving around in the ceremonial space is frowned upon as a distraction that impedes exploration of one's inner space. Trips to the toilet should be short, and people are encouraged to return to the ceremonial space as quickly as possible.

These limits of social interaction in ceremony are framed in terms of respect for the inner depths to which one can go. The desire to help or to comfort another person experiencing difficult or confrontational bouts of purging is interpreted as projective

identification and turned back on itself. Ritual attendees are asked to focus on their own inner reactions, ‘visions’, and feelings. (Gearin, 2016; Gearin 2015:446).

A common refrain among drinkers is that one must ‘do the work on one’s own’, or that the process of drinking ayahuasca over time involves a ‘working through’ of insights or ‘shedding your masks and facing your truth’. The emphasis is on the individual. The idea of ‘working’ or ‘integrating’ knowledge from ayahuasca experiences back into waking life is a recurring theme in the discussions of participants and echoes back to Alan Watts (1965: 16) who noted that psychedelics ‘are useful to the extent that the individual can integrate what they reveal into the whole pattern of his behaviour and the whole system of his knowledge’. Watts (1965: 18) goes on to say that the experience corresponds to ‘an unmerited gift of spiritual power whose lasting effects depend upon the use made of it in subsequent action’. The ‘spiritual gift’, in this case, is often conceptualised as gaining greater self-awareness. As one facilitator put it: ‘The humble facilitator creates a safe space in which *people can connect with themselves*. Guides and nudges the person to get in touch with that’.

Or another: ‘I act as a vehicle, the medicine does its own healing. *It is all you*. Whatever the person is willing and able to accept and open up to. I just provide a safe space’.

The idea that the medicine and the individual consuming it are one, ‘*it is all you*’, is further reflected in the idea that ayahuasca ‘polishes the mirror of the soul’ and reveals to people possibilities for becoming. Shanon (2002: 376) uses the analogy of the ‘mirror of the soul’ to explain how ayahuasca can reveal to people ‘a perfect reflection of who one is’. In this instance, possibilities for personal development are revealed in ways that allow individuals to reflect on how they have arrived at certain points in life, and how further actions along particular trajectories will lead to ideal developmental beings. This equates to something of a sentient Waddingtonian epigenetic landscape. Shanon (2002: 381) uses the analogy of the prism and light for the mind and consciousness to describe the state of a cleansed mind that ayahuasca can induce. When the mind is cleansed, ‘it will reveal the quintessence of its very nature’.

In the limit, the light and the prism would unite and be one. This is exactly what is encountered with ayahuasca. Under the intoxication, the cleansed mind will see richness whose content is unbounded and whose scope is truly infinite. With this, lucidity will be in its utmost and the power of mentation and reflection will be immensely increased. . . The cleaner and more polished the prism, the richer and the more beautiful the spread of colours that it emits. A tainted glass would dim the light, a marred one might altogether block it. A perfect crystal would display the entire spectrum of light in all its magnificence. (Shanon, 2002: 381)

The mirror of the soul analogy and idea that ayahuasca experience can reveal to us our ‘true self’ came through a number of ayahuasca experience narratives of

participants in this study. For example:

It [healing] is shedding the masks that you carry and sitting with yourself, with your truth, and facing your truth.

So ayahuasca acts like a mirror that mirrors to us where we may be trapped emotionally, energetically, maybe where we've actually got physical ailments and then it will communicate with us in a language that we understand, similar to a dream language with symbols and graphics that we understand so if you have a Christian background you may have an experience where you meet mother Mary or Jesus, if you are Indian in the jungle you may morph into a jaguar or an eagle and fly above the forest. So what happens is it will give us an understanding of who we truly are. . .

Everything is rich with ideas of awakening. And the ayahuasca just makes that more clear, just polishes the mirror a little bit. If we look at the mirror and our hair is messy, we don't comb the reflection.

The notion that ayahuasca 'polishes the mirror a little bit' to show us what and how we can become all that we can be runs alongside ideas about ayahuasca revealing one's 'higher-self'. In both cases, the potential otherness of the visionary experience is contained within an expanded, non-relational, 'higher self'. Being all that you can be as an expansive 'higher-self' negates the possibility for transpersonal experience and relational notions of self. As one person put it: 'People talk about the spirit of ayahuasca, *la madre*, blah blah blah. . . and this is people trying to identify it as an entity but it is really us as our higher selves'.

Here is an exchange where an ayahuasca enthusiast recounts meeting 'ayahuasca mother', potentially another being, but where this other spirit gets collapsed into an expanded, multidimensional version of a non-relational self.

MM: Show me something that I can't do. Give me something that I recognize as you and not just my own mind creating it, so that I can distinguish you from me, and she was trying all sorts of things, pretty colours, and I was like 'don't give me that shit I can create that!', and she tried all sorts of sensations and eventually she just said 'fine, I'm not playing your game anymore' and she disappeared and I was totally sober and suddenly I had this feeling of loss, almost like my mum left me.

RR: Is the knowledge of aya coming from the plant or does it come from outside your body?

MM: Everything I'm experiencing is me. And I know that even when I'm talking to her, I'm talking to me. But it is the wider me that I can't reach normally. She shows you what's really there beyond what my physical body can show me and what my physical body perceives. The information is always there. You are always that big. I guess it would be really hard to live in this time-space setting being that big. So by constraining ourselves in the physical body we forget this is not all of who we are.

The concept of selfhood that comes to the fore in Australian ayahuasca ceremonies is immunitarian. It is outwardly expanding but inwardly focused and does not need reference to any *other* in order to maintain identity. Self-development, ‘being all that we can be’, involves recognising that our ‘higher self’ is infinite in a trans-dimensional but asocial sense. Ego transcendence and ego expansion are at odds. Ego transcendence involves the trespassing of borders, but ego expansion involves a reinforcement of the border of ego, disallowing communication with others. I suggest that the pursuit of enlightenment from within that circulates within Australian ayahuasca ceremonies reflects the prevalence of immunitarian ideology in contemporary Australia. In the following section, I explore the ways that ayahuasca ceremonies may both respond to and reproduce immunitarian notions of selfhood.

The malaise of modernity and immunitary individualism

Several scholars, and ayahuasca drinkers, have interpreted the uptake of ayahuasca drinking in the West in terms of symptoms of modernity including disenchantment, individualism, materialism and secularism. As one facilitator put it: ‘There’s a sickness in the West which we don’t have a name for. It’s a cultural malaise where we don’t have that spiritual connection. We’re wanting that connection which the West didn’t offer us. There’s the disconnect’.

Jacques Mabit, the founder of the Takiwasi clinic in Peru, which uses ayahuasca to treat addiction, sees modernity as pathogenic insofar as it has disconnected science from religion. As such, the healing efficacy of ayahuasca is bound up in how the vine is able to unravel knots in people that accrue developmentally in this disenchanted world. To Mabit (2007), ayahuasca plays a role in re-enchanting the patient’s life and in closing the fissure between the domain of religion and the spirit and that of science and matter. Similarly, Blainey (2010) situates the spread of the Santo Daime church outside of Brazil in the context of dissatisfaction with secularist dualism, the dominant Euro-American metaphysical paradigm, and a fondness for ‘a metaphysics of mystical monism’ (p. 127). Drawing on Taylor’s notion of the ‘malaise of modernity’, Tupper (2009: 120) positions the globalisation of ayahuasca in terms of a backdrop of individualism, instrumental reason, and political amotivation. Critically, each of these perspectives hinges upon the assumption that modernity is constitutive of a particular type of selfhood that tends to produce sociocultural malaise. However, whereas Taylor emphasises that the malaise of modernity can be transcended through relationships, the notion of self that predominates in Australian ayahuasca culture equates spiritual development with a self that expands while continuing to be inwardly focused, neither recognising nor relating meaningfully to difference. With respect to the malaise of modernity, Australian ayahuasca drinking may be both palliative and iatrogenic. That is, the rise of ayahuasca ceremonies can be seen as a type of cultural self-medication for disenchantment and alienation that may also reproduce a culture of narcissistic alienation.

In the *Malaise of modernity* Taylor argues that imbuing agency with a strong sense of self and identity is a primary foundation of modernity, which has also produced 'a culture of narcissism'. Taylor (1989: ix) sees the constitution of autonomous identity as 'the ensemble of the (largely unarticulated) understandings of what it is to be a human agent: the senses of inwardness, freedom, individuality, and being embedded in nature, which are at home in the modern West'. In *A secular age* Taylor (2007) argues that Western secularity is built upon a transition from 'porous' (enchanted) to 'buffered' (disenchanted) ways of experiencing selfhood. As such, argues Baldacchino and Kahn (2011: 5), secularity needs to be conceptualised in terms of individualised and rationalised ways of experiencing selfhood, 'a sense of being "thrown" into a disenchanted world and of occupying a narrowly delimited and a temporally delimited lifespan' (Baldacchino & Kahn, 2011: 5). A self, to Taylor, exists in a space bounded by moral horizons against which the limits of self can be tested. Problems occur when a cult of identity and authenticity results in narcissism. The 'malaise of modernity' is the pervasive disease with 'the culture of narcissism', the spread of an outlook that 'makes self-fulfilment the major value in life and that seems to recognise few external moral demands or serious commitment to others' (Taylor, 1989: 55). The fear is that the coming into being of free, creative individuals has given way to egotism, which has devoured appreciation of difference, meaning, and any moral horizon beyond an inwardly bounded individual. In this sense, the phrase, 'It's all you!' captures succinctly the malaise of modernity.

Taylor argues, however, that modernity has 'moral sources' that remain viable today even amidst 'the culture of narcissism'. Internal to the ideals of modernity and the culture of narcissism are sources that can be drawn upon to get out of our malaise. Recovering from the malaise requires that 'we undertake a work of retrieval, that we identify and articulate the higher ideal being the more or less debated practices and then criticize these practices from the standpoint of their own motivating ideal' (Taylor, 1991: 72). Retrieving this authentic 'motivating ideal' is loosely analogous to the idea that ayahuasca 'polishes the crystal' to allow an individual to see their truth and potentiality. The difference, however, is that meaning for Taylor derives from relationships that transcend the self – intimate relations, communal or environmental work, scientific research or work to help the oppressed – but not in 'work' on oneself. The ideal of authenticity linked to a liberal tradition that values diversity, individual freedom, and responsibility cannot have the content of the values as self-referential. According to Taylor (1991: 82), it cannot be all you: 'I can find fulfilment in God, or a political cause, or tending the earth. Indeed. . . we will find genuine fulfilment only in something like this which has significance independent of our desires'.

Like Taylor, Napier and Esposito each argue that the only means of arresting the dulling and alienating effects of narcissism is by experiencing difference and relationship. Napier builds a searing critique of the culture of narcissism, arguing that modernity has produced and normalised what he calls 'the autoimmunological self'. He argues that immunological ideas now provide the central

conceptual framework for how human relations take place in the contemporary world. This involves the elimination of the internalised other projected everywhere and colonisation of the peripheries by the stagnant centre of the human petri dish. Napier sees escape from the malaise of modernity as impossible without transcendence of the self in engagements with real difference. Esposito (2011), meanwhile, sees immunisation against the community as the basic interpretive key to thinking modern social relations. In Esposito's (2013: 42–43) notion of the immunitary self, identity is freed from any relationship to an other and becomes a self-producing and projecting system.

This is the final outcome of the immunitary war that has been waged since the advent of modernity against risks of communal infection. To say that there is no longer an outside against which to defend oneself, that the other does not exist as anything but a projection of the self, is the same as recognizing that the immunitary system has no temporal or spatial limits. The immunitary system is always and everywhere. It coincides with our identity. We are identified with ourselves, definitively drawn away from being altered by the community.

Esposito's discussion of immunitary identity and Napier's autoimmunological self that expands outwardly while failing to recognise difference resonate strongly with the mode of selfhood expressed in the phrase 'it is all you!' Australian ayahuasca drinkers speak of self-development in terms of 'polishing the crystal' but it is unclear how a self can develop without recognising and relating to difference in an open-ended terrain. Australian facilitators (as well as other allied health and spirituality professionals or corporate elites) occasionally organise 'retreats', ceremonies held over a period of several days. Here, people fast and drink and 'go deep'. But from what are people 'retreating'? How is it possible to address 'the disconnect' by way of further disconnection? If the development of an infinite, 'higher self' is an end of ayahuasca drinking, which it is for many, then people retreat from relationality itself. The problem of immune strategy as a basis for spiritual development is that it involves the suppression of the vital difference needed for transformation. To be sure, the grasp of *immunitas* is not totalising. Here a participant emphasises the sense of community and relatedness that people feel as they come together to drink.

There is... a belonging to a community, which I think is the main reason a lot of people here use it... For me the number one thing is a sense of well-being, connectedness that I have gained from it... connectedness to a more emotionally cognizant part of myself that can connect to other people more easily.

Even this account of connectedness, however, is self-referential. Connection is made with oneself. The tension here is that achieving connectedness is bound to ideas of self-development relating to an immunitarian self. Are Australian ayahuasca ceremonies spaces in which new opportunities for the experience of difference

and creative transformation become possible? The possibility certainly that they can be exists. On the other hand, does spiritual growth equate to immunitarian ego expansion? If the latter is true, then ayahuasca rituals reproduce the immunitarian individualism that drives some to seek re-enchantment in spiritual pursuits such as ayahuasca ceremonies. Nietzsche (1989: III: 21) identified this homeopathic dialectic between preservation and destruction whereby improvement is entirely contained within the treatment.

But when such a system is chiefly applied to the sick, distressed and depressed, it invariably makes them sicker even if it does 'improve' them. . . one may without any exaggeration call it the true calamity in the history of European health.

Similarly, spiritual development premised on an expansive 'higher self' can be both a response to and a driver of the malaise of modernity. I do not mean to say that the ayahuasca drinkers I spoke with suffer from narcissistic tendencies any more than any other group of Australians. Immunitary individualism is an aspect of mainstream Australian culture that relates to a history of Western thought, as well as to the expansion of neoliberal governmentality. Neoshamanism is just one cultural practice in which we might expect to see immunitary individualism expressed.

Conclusion

While psychedelic substances were associated in 1960s and 1970 counterculture with transformative social projects on one hand and ego shattering and transcendental experiences on the other, it is notable that many Australian ayahuasca ceremonies place a strong emphasis on individualism and the development of an expansive, non-relational self. Despite the extreme lability of set, setting, and experience dynamics, the conformism of the post-political age hangs heavily on contemporary ayahuasca culture. Immunitary individualism shapes the form of many ayahuasca rituals in Australia, which then encourages interpreting visions in terms of a non-relational sense of self. This results in a tendency to reproduce and entrench rather than transcend immunitary ideology, part of the 'malaise of modernity' associated with the spread of ayahuasca drinking in the first place.

A dominant theme for how people involved in this study understand the ayahuasca terrain in Australia is as an infinite space of self: 'it is all me', 'I am infinite'. And while people speak of the dissolution of inside and outside and are cognisant of not claiming the beauty, knowledge and potency of the ayahuasca experience as their own but as 'a gift' to be handled with great reverence, there is no reckoning with the Other, other beings, different beings, or difference of any sort when the terrain is assumed to be an extension of an immunitary self. Spirit, as an extension of a non-relational self, displaces the opportunity for encountering spirits or thinking in terms of relationships. If a culture of narcissism is a degenerate of the ideal of a striving for identity and authenticity linked to modernity, then ayahuasca may be a palliative for some, iatrogenic for others. The idea that self-actualisation, self-development, or the

solution to any social problem could begin and end from self-directed activities is problematic because connection cannot end with internal circuits.

The experiences of Australian Ayahuasca drinkers in this study can be seen as both a response to the ‘autoimmunological state’, the numbing of experience that occurs as the centre of the petri dish has devoured difference and creativity at the periphery, and the possibility that this very other world, the ayahuasca terrain, appears at least partly colonised by the forces of modernity. The centre of the petri dish has pulled ayahuasca into it. Can ayahuasca, then, allow for new appreciation of difference without domesticating and destroying that difference in the name of an immunitary self? Or is it just all you?

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