



Plant Medicines and Shamanic Healing

by Ross Heaven

Since the beginning of human experience, plants have played a role in the evolution of our species, not only in the provision of food and medicine but also in our deepest spiritual experiences and the development of consciousness. According to the shamans of the Amazon – one of Earth’s last (mostly) unspoiled areas and a bastion for deep and intimate plant knowledge – it was the plants themselves that taught us how to heal and know our souls.

On a recent trip to the Amazon, Laurencio Garcia, a Shipibo poet, storyteller, and shaman from Peru, told me how “at the beginning of time, the jungle revealed its spirit” to rainforest tribes.

“In those days, our ancestors could still enter the place where the spirits of the animals and forest lived. They could talk with plants and animals and share

knowledge of the plants to use for healing. We were one with all life.

“Our ancestors lived like this until the Moon Man came and cut the rope they used to climb into the spirit world. Then we lost our way.

“It was terrible and there was much sadness. But then we found another way back to that world: the ayahuasca vine, which is the rope that we now climb into the spirit realms.”

In the Shipibo tradition, the moon is associated with the rational mind and it is the coming of science, Western forms of medicine, and the victory of dualistic and logic-based thought over intuition and natural wisdom which, severed our connection to spirit. The story of the Moon Man is one which speaks of our need to rediscover our spiritual roots by

Dr Jacques Mabit revealed how one-third of the patients who begin treatment with him for drug addictions are completely cured through ayahuasca use, with a success rate as high as 70% for those who complete the full treatment.¹ Other accounts include remissions from cancer, cures for deafness, and the lifting of depression.^{2,3}

using a new rope – ayahuasca – which was given to us as a way back to the world we once knew.

Ayahuasca: The Vine of Souls

Ayahuasca is the most important medicine of the Amazon. Made from the vine *Banisteriopsis caapi* and the leaves of the chacruna plant (*Psychotria viridis*), it is a potent visionary mixture which opens the person who drinks it to the experience of the world underlying our own. Its name, which suggests these properties, is derived from two native words: *aya* meaning ‘spirit’ and *huasca*: ‘rope’ – hence it is commonly known as ‘the vine of souls’ or ‘the rope of the dead’.

It is prepared by cutting the vines into lengths which are cleaned and pounded, then placed in a cauldron with the leaves. Water is added and the mixture is boiled for 12 hours, overseen by a shaman.

When ingested, this muddy, pungent liquid produces feelings of warmth which spread from the stomach, creating a sense of wellbeing and skin elasticity, as if the skin has become rubber-like and no longer separate from the air. After this, there are visionary effects. Images of snakes and vines and iridescent colours are common but, to the shaman’s eye, symbols of the diseases which inhabit his client’s body are also seen. It is these which enable him, and the spirit of ayahuasca, to heal.

During the visionary phase, purging, in the form of vomiting or diarrhoea may also take place. This can sometimes be emotionally uncomfortable for Westerners who drink ayahuasca, and who have been brought up to control their bodily functions and not ‘let go’ like this. But it is welcomed by people of the Amazon, who



Shipibo shaman Laurencio Garcia oversees ayahuasca preparation by participants on one of the author's trips to the Amazon.



Participants say their prayers and ask for blessings from ayahuasca brew.



The prepared ayahuasca which is drunk.

believe that this purging releases 'spiritual poisons' which can lead to physical illness. By clearing out the system physically and spiritually, *la purga* ('the purge':

another of ayahuasca's many names) restores balance to the soul and empowers the body to fight against disease.

Though these beliefs may seem strange to us, in fact, many remarkable cures have also been attributed to ayahuasca by Western doctors. In an interview with BBC Radio 4's *Crossing Continents* programme, for example, Dr Jacques Mabit revealed how one-third of the patients who begin treatment with him for drug addictions are completely cured through ayahuasca use, with a success rate as high as 70% for those who complete the full treatment.¹ Other accounts include

The main ingredients in chacruna, for example, are tryptamines which, if taken orally, are rendered inactive by the body's enzymes. The vine, however, contains MAO (monoamine oxidase) inhibitors in the form of harmine compounds, so when the two plants come together they complement each other and a psychoactive compound results which has an identical chemical make-up to the organic tryptamines in our bodies. The mixture, therefore, finds its way easily into our brain, and bonds smoothly to synaptic receptor sites, enabling a powerful visionary experience.

remissions from cancer, cures for deafness, and the lifting of depression.^{2,3}

In scientific terms, ayahuasca vine is an inhibitor that contains harmala and harmaline, while chacruna contains vision-inducing alkaloids. It is this mixture which gives the brew its hallucinogenic properties.

There are still many mysteries about how the shamans knew how to combine these plants, for, separate from the other, each is more or less inert.

The main ingredients in chacruna, for example, are tryptamines which, if taken orally, are rendered inactive by the body's enzymes. The vine, however, contains MAO (monoamine oxidase) inhibitors in the form of harmine compounds, so when the two plants come together they complement each other and a psychoactive compound results which has an identical chemical make-up to the organic tryptamines in our bodies. The mixture, therefore, finds its way easily into our brain, and bonds smoothly to synaptic receptor sites, enabling a powerful visionary experience.

Some, like the writer and 'psychonaut' Terence McKenna, believe that our capacity for expanded consciousness and deep thought arose directly from the ingestion of plants such as these, and the visionary effects they produced, at a time when human beings were nomadic hunter-gatherers, barely human at all, and would forage for food and eat what-

ever they found, or whatever 'spirit' guided them to.⁴

Certainly it is true that more than a million years ago, the human brain underwent what Rita Carter, in her book, *Mapping the Mind*, describes as "an explosive enlargement."

"So sudden was it that the bones of the skull were pushed outwards, creating the high, flat forehead and domed head that distinguish us from primates. The areas that expanded most are those concerned with thinking, planning, organizing and communicating. The frontal lobes of the brain duly expanded by some 40% to create large areas of new gray matter: the neo-cortex [and] pre-frontal lobes."⁵

Nobody knows what caused this dramatic enlargement, but an expansion in consciousness could be responsible, the theory being that we would need new grey matter to process and store the visionary information downloaded from the plants.

The Ayahuasca Experience

In his influential book *The Cosmic Serpent*, scientist Jeremy Narby writes of his ayahuasca experiences with the people of the Upper Amazon, concluding that shamans there are able, through this brew, to merge with "the global network of DNA-based life."⁶

In his ayahuasca ceremonies Narby saw visions of two gigantic anacondas (the 'cosmic serpents' of his book's title), which spoke to him without words and revealed mysteries and healing secrets to him. This fired his interest and he began to explore the consistency of such imagery. The first similarity he noticed was the common image of reptiles and snakes, often a "celestial serpent", that occurs in many shamanic traditions the world over.

The similarity between DNA, the winding ayahuasca vine, and the snake imagery it produces led Narby to suggest that shamans, through their ingestion of the brew, communicate with the information stored in DNA.

He then began to study the characteristics of DNA and found that it emits electromagnetic waves corresponding to the narrow band of visible light. This weak light is equivalent to the intensity of a candle at a distance of ten kilometres, but has a high degree of coherence, comparable to a laser. It is fascinating to speculate that this is the waveform of consciousness, and that plants such as ayahuasca are the means of making it – and the illnesses which disrupt its signal – visible to shamanic sight.



Clay baths are often taken as a form of purification to prepare for ayahuasca ceremonies.

There are certain other plants too which, because of their healing effects and their importance in the initiation of ayahuasca shamans and the rituals that surround the use of the brew, have also come to prominence. These are the *planta maestros* (the 'master teachers') of the plant world, which are key among the shaman's tutelary spirits and guides to health and healing. By knowing these plants, the shaman can deal effectively with the most common diseases of his people.

It is difficult to find discrete Western analogues for some of these plants because they grow where they are needed, and the healing required by a London banker, for example, will be different from that of a Peruvian farmer. The psychological and spiritual benefits such plants bestow, and their ability to restore emotional balance, banish negative energies, or open the heart to love,



Flower baths are a traditional means of preparation for ayahuasca ceremonies



The blowing of smoke by the shaman into the participant's crown (known as soplada) is a form of healing.

are desirable in any culture, however, so it is possible to find herbs with equivalent or similar effects wherever we live.

With this in mind, these are some of the more commonly used *planta maestros* and (either singularly or in combination) plants of our own that Amazonian shamans say will produce like effects.

Chiric sanango grows in the *restingas* of the Amazon, on the high ground where it never floods. Chiric, in the ancient Quechua language, means ‘tickling’ or ‘itchy’ and refers to the prickly heat that the plant generates in the patient once ingested. Shamans often prescribe it for fishermen because they spend so much time in the water and are prone to colds and arthritis. It is also used in magical baths to change the bather’s energy and bring good luck.

Used in the West, the plant has a more psychological effect, but still to do with ‘heat’. Here, it enables people to open their hearts to love (it warms up a cold heart, but will also cool a heart that is too inflamed with jealousy and rage). In essence, it helps people get in touch with their more sensitive and loving sides.

It can be prepared as a tea, in *aguardiente* (weak sugar cane alcohol) or made into syrup by adding its juice to honey. It can also be eaten raw and is said to better penetrate the bones if taken in this way.

Mint has some of the properties of *chiric sanango* and is a balancer of the body’s physical and emotional heat. For these reasons it has been associated with the planet Venus, which was named after the Roman goddess of love.

Guayusa is a plant used for people who suffer from excessive acidity, digestive, or other problems of the stomach and bile. It also develops mental strength, and is paradoxical in the sense that it is both energizing and relaxing.

Shamans say that it also produces prophetic or lucid dreams (when you are aware that you are dreaming and can direct your dreams). For this reason it is known in the Amazon as ‘the night watchman’s plant’, as even when you are sleeping you have an awareness of your surroundings. The boundary between sleeping and wakefulness becomes fluid, and dreams become colourful, richer, and more potent than before.

In the Western world, bracken, jasmine, or poplar can produce some of the same dreaming effects. The leaves and buds of the latter were a key ingredient in the ‘flying ointments’ of European witches, for example, who used it for what we would call astral travel.

Ajo sachá is a blood purifier and helps the body rid itself of toxins (spiritual or physical) as well as restoring strength. More psycho-spiritually, it helps to take the user out of *saladera* (a run of bad luck, inertia, or a sense of not living life to the full). Used as a bathing essence, it relieves the effects of shock (called *manchiari* by Amazonian shamans) which can be particularly debilitating to children, whose souls are not as strong or fixed as an adult’s, and a shock can therefore lead to the loss of their energy or spirit.

Western plants with equivalent uses include valerian and vervain. The former was recorded from the 16th century as an aid to a restful mind, and in the two world wars it was used to combat anxiety and depression. By relaxing the mind, the psyche can go to work on the real problem, aided by the plant itself.

Vervain, meanwhile, was well-known to the Druids, who used it to protect against ‘evil spirits’ (nowadays, we might say ‘inner issues’ or ‘the shadow-self’). It is also used as a treatment for paranoia, insomnia, and depression. Once again, by relaxing the conscious mind we can stalk the more deeply-rooted problem.

The ‘Medicine of Love’

Against this backdrop of healing and the natural benefits available from plants – and their spirits – it is depressing for Amazonian shamans that the rainforest, home to so many healing plants still unknown to Western medicine, is being destroyed by the ‘developed nations’ with little consideration for the consequences. Every three seconds in the Amazon, an entire species is wiped out in the name of progress.

According to Javier Aravelo, a shaman from Iquitos, people are prone to such “madness” as a result of confusion, because “they do not know who they are or what they really want”.

His point was underlined a few years ago when he worked with a group of participants on a trip to the Amazon to drink ayahuasca and, prior to their ceremonies, he asked them what they wanted the healing to accomplish.

“Most gave spiritual or ‘cosmic’ answers and spoke of world peace and saving the planet”, said Javier. “And so I asked them again: what do you want? This time, they were more honest and all of them said that what they really wanted was love.

“This I could understand because their requests were real and personal this time, not about saving the world. But what puzzled me most was that at first they had not felt entitled to ask for love or had been conditioned not to know what they wanted.

“Yet, paradoxically, their honest desires were where true healing can begin, since, if more people were able to experience love, there would be no need for the madness of developed society and, consequently, no need to save our planet, which would never be in danger.

“Love solves problems and ayahuasca is the medicine of love. This is how plants really cure.”

References

1. Lizarzaburu J. Peru Seeks Tribal Cure for Addiction. BBC News. 5 November 2003. http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/programmes/crossing_continents/3243277.stm
2. Heaven R. *Spirit in the City: The Search for the Sacred in Everyday Life*. Bantam Books. London. ISBN-10: 0553813242. 2002.
3. Perkins J. *Introduction to The Journey to You: A Shaman’s Path to Empowerment*. Heaven R. Bantam Books. London. ISBN-10: 0553813234. 2001.
4. McKenna T. *Food of the Gods: The Search for the Original Tree of Knowledge, A Radical History of Plants, Drugs, and Human Evolution*. Rider & Co. London. ISBN-10: 0712670386. 1999.
5. Carter R. *Mapping the Mind*. Phoenix Books. London. ISBN-10: 0753810190. 2000.
6. Narby J. *The Cosmic Serpent: DNA and the Origins of Knowledge*. Phoenix Books. London. ISBN-10: 075380851X. 1999.

About the Author

Ross Heaven is a psychologist, author, workshop facilitator and presenter. He has written more than ten books on psychology, shamanism, plant medicines, and the healing traditions, including *The Journey to You*, which was described by Amazon Books as ‘the most important book on shamanism in years’; *Plant Spirit Shamanism*, about Amazonian medicine practices; and *The Sin Eater’s Last Confessions*, about traditional healing and plant cures in Britain and Wales. Ross runs workshops on the themes of his books, as well as to the Peruvian Amazon to work with the ayahuasca shamans. He may be contacted via ross_heaven2@yahoo.co.uk; www.thefourgates.com.

