

Chapter 4

Moments of Insight, Healing, and Transformation: A Cognitive Phenomenological Analysis

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Abstract In this chapter, I examine instances of special significance in people's experience with ayahuasca. Specifically, I consider instances in which psychological insights are gained and personal transformation and/or healing take place. The analysis provides a structural typology of facets of the ayahuasca experience based on empirical data gathered in a broader study that presents a systematic charting of the phenomenology of the special state of mind induced by this brew. The analysis and discussion are from a phenomenological cognitive-psychological approach rather than a clinical-psychological or medical perspective.

Preliminary Remarks

This chapter examines instances of psychological insight, healing, and transformation as they occur within the special state of mind induced by ayahuasca. By way of defining the scope and orientation—both theoretical and methodological—of this discussion, let me open by introducing my professional stance and myself. I am a cognitive psychologist who has been investigating ayahuasca since the mid 1990s. My primary field of research concerns the phenomenology of human

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consciousness. My goal is to chart the domain of the mental, to determine lawful regularities in it, and to attempt to conceptualize it within a cognitive-psychological theoretical framework. Pursuing this perspective, I have studied both ordinary and non-ordinary states of mind (for a general review, see Shanon 2008). My investigations of the former dealt with trains of verbal-like expressions that spontaneously pass through people's minds, with mental imagery, and with dreams. My study of non-ordinary states of mind focuses on ayahuasca and is summarized in my monograph *The Antipodes of the Mind* (Shanon 2002a) as well as in a series of articles, notably Shanon (1998a, 2001, 2002b, 2003a; for publications in Portuguese see Shanon 2003b, 2004). I apply the phenomenological approach to the ayahuasca experience.

My study of the ayahuasca experience is grounded in the assessment that there is a reciprocally beneficial relationship between ayahuasca and cognitive psychology. On the one hand, cognitive psychology offers a productive methodological and theoretical framework for the analysis of the ayahuasca experience, and on the other hand, the non-ordinary experiential phenomenology that ayahuasca induces unravels new facets of the human mind and offers new vistas for the study of human consciousness. As Huxley (1956) observed following his experimentation with mescaline, the non-ordinary phenomena encountered with powerful psychoactive substances may be likened to hidden, uncharted territories of the mind. He further suggested that the intellectual import of these substances is in allowing an expanded geography of the human psyche. I concur (see also James 1902/1929; and further discussion in Shanon 2003a).

My goal is to specify patterns in this experience in which moments of meaningful psychological impact tend to occur. The patterns I survey are neither mandatory nor exclusive, and it is not the case that each individual experiences all of them. Rather, taken in unison, these patterns define a heretofore not investigated aspect of the multifaceted domain which is the special state of mind that ayahuasca induces. My interest is the prototypical human being (as contrasted with any particular individual) established on the basis of data drawn from the experiences of a large number of people. The outcome of my research is a systematic portrayal of patterns that may be regarded as constituting a set of psychological possibilities.

On the personal level, let me note that many of the ayahuasca sessions in which I myself participated were healing sessions conducted in the Amazon by indigenous and mestizo ayahuasqueros. In these sessions, I both received treatment and observed other individuals as they underwent treatment. Like many other ayahuasca drinkers in the various contexts in which I have partaken of the brew, I too have experienced moments of self-healing and deep psychological insight. Obviously, all these have had great impact on my life. On a couple of occasions, patients were passed to me to treat them as well. This happened without prior planning or notification, in light of interpersonal developments within the session.

I do find it pertinent to clarify my stance with regard to the nature and status of ayahuasca visions and the experiences associated with them. As explained in Shanon (2002a), I do not believe in the paranormal. Specifically, I do not view the visions seen with ayahuasca as depictions of other, ontologically existing, realities.

Nor do I regard the insights gained in the course of the ayahuasca inebriation as messages conveyed from non-ordinary sources, whatever they might be. Moreover, I do not regard the items seen in ayahuasca visions as symbolic representations of something else. Rather, by my view, these items, like the things we encounter in the context of our ordinary life, are presentations of what they themselves are. Their meaning and psychological impact is not to be sought in the manner of classical psychoanalysis, by way of the interpretation of covert information they symbolize, conceal or replace, but rather through the experiential impact they have. I would say that the meaning of ayahuasca visions is to be conceived in a manner similar to that of works of art: paintings and pieces of music. Admittedly, some paintings are representational, but not all are, and usually the genius of masterpieces is not in their strict representational features. In general, it might be said that great paintings are instructive in that they make people look at the world and see it with a fresh perspective.

The case of music is even more poignant: Music is neither representational nor symbolic, yet it does convey meaning. This it does through placing listeners in moods and frames of mind, and dynamically carrying them from one mood or frame to another. Thus, music conveys hope and despair, joy and tragedy, serenity and also frivolity, and it can invoke the grand impetus of life, the broad perspective of “being” as well as the dimension of the sacred. All these, I find, hold for ayahuasca visions. In fact, it might be ventured that the more abstract ayahuasca visions could be regarded as music in the visual mode. Furthermore, ayahuasca may function in a manner similar to the theater (or psychodrama) in its putting people through powerful, non-ordinary experiences. Obviously, encountering a jaguar in a vision is not something that leaves one unmoved. The objective (that is, from a third-person point of view) fact that the apparition is a so-called “hallucinatory vision” does not in any way detract from its experiential impact by making it less frightening, less challenging, and so forth.

Given my phenomenological-experiential perspective, I believe that the healing and transformative power of ayahuasca is to be viewed neither as recourse to the paranormal (as is believed by almost all users of ayahuasca, both traditional and modern) nor in classical psychoanalytical or psychodynamic terms. Rather, I examine the phenomenology of the ayahuasca experience to define those moments, patterns, and configurations during the course of the inebriation in which meaningful psychological insight, personal change, and healing occur. Such an examination reveals a series of salient patterns; together, these define the typology that is the subject matter of this chapter.

Guided by the approach sketched above, I systematically charted the various facets of the ayahuasca experience. These include the general atmosphere that the brew induces, the bodily and affective responses it triggers: non-ordinary perceptions in all sensory modalities, personal and intellectual ideations and insights, patterns of creativity and overt performance, and mystical and religious experiences. My research project is based on the analysis of a large corpus of empirical data from my own experiences with ayahuasca and the interviews I have conducted with almost 200 individuals. My informants included indigenous shamans,

indigenous and mestizo (mixed blood) lay persons, residents of South America who are members of various syncretic groups using ayahuasca, independent drinkers (that is, persons with extensive experience who are not members of any group), as well as Europeans and North Americans; some of my informants were first timers with no prior experience with the brew. A full, systematic account of this research is presented in Shanon (2002a), which is the basis for the following survey and analysis.

My stance with regards to the status of ayahuasca visions and their interpretation is grounded in a general theoretical (and non-orthodox) approach to psychology that is radically non-representational (for details, see Shanon 1993). Specifically, I do not maintain that the basis for cognitive activity and behavior are covert mental representations; instead of grounding psychological theory in symbolic representation, I focus on the systematic study of the experiential (hence conscious) articulations of human cognition, which I call presentations. By my approach, the task of scientific psychology is to study the lawful patterns and dynamics of these presentations.

A Phenomenological Survey

The following phenomenological survey examines the aspects of psychological insight, personal change, and healing as they occur in conjunction with different aspects of the ayahuasca experience. These aspects are: the physical dimension, general atmosphere and the affective dimension, the visions, enactment, interaction, mentation, the religious and spiritual dimension, experiences of light, and patterns of manifest behavior.

The Physical Dimension

Although the topic of our discussion is psychological, I would like to begin with the consideration of physical effects. Confronting bodily discomfort and dealing with it can have significant psychotherapeutic ramifications. Indeed, I would single out such confrontation as the most basic psychotherapeutic and healing aspect of the ayahuasca experience.

The first effects I shall mention have to do with the general flavor of the intoxication. Ayahuasca is notorious for the awful nausea and physical malaise it induces. Often (although definitely not always), these are accompanied by violent vomiting. This effect, and the brew itself, is called *purga*, purging. Vomiting, it is believed, cleanses one's body from impurities. Such bodily cleansing is a prior, first step toward psychological healing. For one thing, strong discomforting experiences, along with the anxiety associated with them, demand some sort of response. These force drinkers to engage in self-examination, to learn to be in

touch with their bodies, to collect their resources, and to attempt to confront challenges and overcome them. Moreover, the very act of vomiting has various psychological aspects. Central among these is the recognition of one's weakness and the concomitant sentiment of humility. Often associated with this is the physical posture of bowing and lowering one's head that normally accompanies the act of vomiting. Asking my informants about the most significant moments they have had with ayahuasca, several replied with a description of the first powerful physical purge they experienced. The purge was extremely unpleasant, yet it also brought about radical personal changes; in some cases, the impact of these changes was life-long.

Dealing with the purge is just one, albeit the most common, case of dealing with bodily malaise. With the generally enhanced sensitivities that ayahuasca induces, people learn to listen to their bodies and be more attuned to them. On the one hand, they discover finer and finer gradations in their sensations; on the other hand, they learn to attend to these gradations and tenderly take care of the pains and discomforts associated with them. Many told me that under the intoxication, they realized they could enter their inner organs and even cells and carry out minute and extremely delicate operations, mending the system from within. The ability to manage difficult bodily sensations and the experience of self-healing usually serve as meaningful lessons from which one may profit later, outside the context of ayahuasca.

As an example of a non-ordinary handling of bodily discomfort, let me report one experience I myself had; it has to do with a chronic prostate problem I have which forces me to urinate frequently. Once during an ayahuasca session, I felt I had to relieve myself, but I was apprehensive about leaving the hall. What I did instead was concentrate on the liquid that accumulated in my bladder and directed it upward. In my visionary frame of being, I channeled the urine toward my head, and then it all came out from the top of my skull emerging as a wonderful multi-colored fountain. In doing this, I ceased to be bothered by my bodily needs.

Throughout my long-term experience with ayahuasca I have also come to manage vomiting by transforming it to another physical act, namely, singing. In other words, instead of pouring out vomit, I would emit song. I might note that overall, I have vomited in just about 5 % of the times I have partaken of the brew.

The physical dimension is not confined to only negative sensations. Obviously, people partake of ayahuasca because it also induces good feelings. Ayahuasca drinkers report that the brew connected (or re-connected) them to that energy which is the source of well being and health; and that, as a consequence, they were revitalized. In general, having overcome the negative effects of ayahuasca, drinkers feel invigorated and experience heightened stamina. They also feel joyful and happy. One external manifestation of this is the ability to engage in night-long dancing without fatigue. Another publicly observable manifestation is drinkers' countenance. Towards the end of ayahuasca sessions, drinkers usually appear to be remarkably relaxed—indeed, serene—and often they seem to be both rejuvenated and strikingly good-looking. Usually, such effects disappear when the effect of the brew is over about a day afterward. However, it seems to me that in itself the very taste of well being and bliss can have a significant, viable positive therapeutic effect.

Atmosphere and the Affective Dimension

The second dimension along which ayahuasca effectuates psychological change and healing has to do with the overall ambiance of the intoxication and the various affective reactions to it. Overall, ayahuasca induces an ambiance of otherworldliness, whereby people have the feeling of entering into another, heretofore unknown, reality. Often, this feeling is coupled with enchantment. Characteristic of these feelings is the appraisal that the world is more beautiful than it normally appears to be, and that everything is invested with deep meaning. Both effects—the esthetic and the semantic—often impart a feeling that the world is awash with a bounty of good. Together, all these experiences generate sentiments of wonder and marvel. Such positive reactions can, in themselves, have significant therapeutic and curative effects.

The recognition that there is bountiful goodness in the world and the acknowledgement that one is potentially privy to it can define a new perspective for the assessment of one's human condition. Invariably, this perspective is characterized as less egotistic, more optimistic, more harmonious, and laden with more meaning and responsibility. The bounty of good discovered in all of existence is often interpreted as a manifestation of grace and/or heavenly love. Typically, this entails sentiments of appreciation and gratitude. For many, the ayahuasca experience also brings forth profound spiritual and religious feelings, which, in some cases, result in radical changes in people's belief systems and the manner in which they conduct their lives.

Another feature of the general atmosphere induced by ayahuasca has to do with temporality. With ayahuasca, people often feel that they are privy to the dimension of eternity. The experience of atemporality, which may be associated with what is taken to be the realms of the gods, lends human existence a new perspective. With this, the problems and concerns that an individual faces during the course of his or her life may receive different proportions and the measure of what is significant for one may change. In particular, one learns to appreciate the good things in one's life, to modify the relative importance that one allots to whatever one has and whatever one lacks, and to adopt an overall perspective of appreciation and gratitude.

There are also negative reactions, notably ones of fear. Fear may, however, have significant constructive psychological effects. For one thing, it may force drinkers to confront their own smallness and weakness. Overcoming fear, drinkers invariably have a sense of accomplishment. This in itself has a major transformative effect.

Lastly, ayahuasca typically generates marked positive interpersonal feelings; notably, love, empathy, compassion, and forgiveness. Each of these has its own salutatory impact. Empathy and closeness are also experienced *vis à vis* animals, plants, and nature at large. In particular, the tie to nature makes people feel that they are connected to "positive energies" which can effectuate healing. Such sentiments, which I have heard from many of my informants and which I have also experienced myself, are at the heart of traditional ayahuasca medicinal practice.

The Impact of Visions

Ayahuasca is especially famous for the powerful visions it induces. In this regard, I would like to point out that many of the general effects discussed above are often experienced in conjunction with the visions and may be especially salient as part or along with the visual experience. This is particularly marked with regard to the esthetic dimension: Time and again, drinkers report that the beauty exhibited by the visions surpasses anything that they have ever seen or imagined. Often, the very encountering of such beauty induces all sorts of “good feelings” which can entail a new, positive attitude to life.

More specific is the instructive, informative impact of the visions. In the different contexts of ayahuasca usage, the visions are valued primarily for the teachings they impart. Indeed, in all contexts of ayahuasca usage the brew is regarded as the Master, the teacher (see Luna 1984, 1986). Usually, the visions impart their teaching by showing. A paradigmatic case is for the visions to present the drinker with past situation in his or her life. Looking at these as an observer, one can view one’s life in new light. In particular, this is so with visions that consist of snapshots of the past. Inspecting a past situation as an observer, one may gain insights with respect to his or her personality and behavior. Especially remarkable are the compound structures I call “thematic serials”; these are series of visions pertaining to a common theme. For example, one of my informants saw a series of snapshots depicting various moments of her biography. The shots were not ordered chronologically, but rather juxtaposed thematically. The juxtaposition revealed some patterns in the drinker’s personality and conduct of which she had not been previously aware.

Another type characterized by its instructive impact is what I call “metaphorical parables.” Visions of this type are similar to parables in the Bible: An image is presented and the viewer draws a moral from it. In the data I have collected, almost all instances of this type involve personal psychological insights with ramifications on the drinker’s conduct of his or her life. For instance, one woman told me that in her first ayahuasca session, she saw herself fully encased in a transparent plastic sheet. Whenever she moved, the cover moved with her. She realized that she had been leading her life separated from other people. Even though it seemed that she was in contact with other people, in essence she was insulated and had no direct contact with anyone. This realization made this person change her attitude regarding human interpersonal relations. Of this same type is a vision of a dilapidated building I have heard reported independently by two different individuals. Apparently, when originally constructed, the building was a nice one, but now it was shabby and in disrepair. Upon inspecting their visions, each of the two individuals recognized the building appearing in the vision as himself; this, in turn, made these individuals appreciate that they should make some drastic changes in their lives.

The following vision is my own, experienced when I was suffering from malaria. I saw two snakes wrapped around each other. Seeing that, I realized that health and sickness are the two facets of one complex. Specifically, I reflected that if one engages with the snakes in one direction one is inflicted with disease, whereas in the other direction health and well being are gained. Indeed, both illness and good health are energy. The symptoms of the body—that is, the illness—are pertinent to the process of cure. First, they are signs that the body sends to one, and thus they have important informative value. Second, if they are channeled appropriately, they can direct the organism to a new state of well being. The key to healing is rooted in grasping the energy of the illness and transforming it into the energy of healing. It further occurred to me that this is analogous to the taking, in physics, of potential energy and transforming it into kinetic energy.

With this realization, I made the most significant step toward being cured from my illness.

Several informants told me about visions in which they were confronted with two possibilities between which they had to choose. In all cases, the choice was conceived as being between good and evil. For example, in one such vision, one informant saw a black panther on one side and a wise man on the other. He understood that he had to choose between the two, and that he should follow the course that is good.

More dramatic than the metaphorical parables is personification, such as that exemplified in the following narrative that is focally concerned with disease. It was reported to me by a middle-aged European man afflicted with HIV. In his vision, he saw a person in bad health, poorly taken care of, and with a rather repellent appearance. This person criticized the drinker for depleting him of his vital energies. Seeing him, the drinker had the insight that he was actually encountering his own virus. This made him make peace with the virus, and wish healthy co-existence for both. At the time of the report, about 2 years after the episode of the vision, the man told me he was in good health.

There are also cases in which the visualization depicts actual teaching. Specifically, a teacher or a guide appears in the vision and instructs the drinker and guides her or him. In some cases, this figure is conceived as a divine or angelic being who directs the drinker in the further conduct of his or her life. At times, it is one's own "inner" or "higher" self or voice who gives the instruction. Instruction by a guide is especially common in accounts of indigenous ayahuasqueros with regard to their learning how to heal. They note that ayahuasca instructs them both how to diagnose their patients and how to proceed in curing (see Siskind 1973; Chaumeil 1983; Payaguaje 1983; Luna 1984, 1986; Gebhart-Sayer 1986; Baer 1992; Langdon 1992; as well as Luna and Amaringo 1991). Similar claims were made by several of my non-indigenous informants, especially those associated with the health and helping professions. Personally, I felt this once when I treated a patient myself. As I have noted, I am neither a clinical psychologist nor a medical doctor, but on a couple of occasions I found myself attending to sick persons. This happened in the context of traditional healing sessions in the Amazon, in the midst of a session, without prior planning or notification. The following is an account of this episode:

As is common in such practices, I placed my hands on my patient's head and blew on it. As I was doing this, I saw myself at the head of a long line of forest animals. The animals formed a long triangular column and one to one were passing energy and support forward. Eventually, it all converged in my hands and breath giving me the power to heal.

I might add that the treatment of this patient was successful.

Enactment

Usually, the relationship of the ayahuasca drinker to the visions that he or she experiences is that of a spectator. However, when visions are powerful, they may be most absorbing and involve the drinker as an active participant, immersed in the scene of the vision. What is experienced to happen in the vision may have a great impact on people and, consequently, have significant transformative and curative effects. Following work I have done on ordinary consciousness, I refer to the phenomenon of acting within the vision as “enactment” (see Shanon 1988, 1998b). This phenomenon is not specific to non-ordinary states of consciousness. Both empirical and theoretical research (see Shanon 1993, 1998b) has led me to conclude that one of the key functions of consciousness is for human beings to have a kind of virtual reality in which they can act. Acting is important because, by my non-representational, non-symbolic, approach to cognition, the basic capability of the human cognitive system is not the processing of information, but precisely this: acting in the world (This view follows Heidegger 1927/1962; see also Dreyfus 1990, Merleau-Ponty 1962; as well as Varela, Thompson and Rosch 1991, and their paradigm of enaction). But acting in the real world can be risky, dangerous, and even impossible. Having subjective experiences of hypothetical scenarios enables us to simulate action in the province of our minds even when such actions are not feasible in the real world. For example, we can rehearse an important conversation before we actually meet our interlocutor or examine different possible solutions to problems without actually making concrete changes in the physical world (see Johnson-Laird 1983 and his theory of “mental models”). Ayahuasca visions present people with extreme cases of virtual realities in the province of consciousness. Whereas the virtual realities people entertain in ordinary states of consciousness are, in general, similar to states of affairs they normally encounter in the external world, the states of affairs experienced with ayahuasca are usually most extraordinary.

As in life, so in the visions: Confronting challenges and managing hurdles, overcoming fear, collecting one's resources and finding solutions to difficult problems and situations—all these are learning experiences that invest ayahuasca drinkers with feelings of accomplishment and boost their sense of self-worth and self-esteem. All these can be of great therapeutic value.

An episode that was of great personal significance to me is the following one, which exemplifies what may be characterized as intra-vision achievement. The following example is my own:

There were seven men in front of me, each holding a puma on a leash. At one instant, the pumas were freed and moved towards me. I knew I had to act fast. And then it happened: A brook appeared between me and the pumas and I placed beautiful water lilies in it. The pumas were attracted to the flowers and they came to the river and drank. Having done so, they forgot about me and they all turned back and went away.

After this session, I felt a deep satisfaction; it seemed to me that I had advanced a grade in the school of ayahuasca.

And again, as in life, there are also failures. Here is an example from my own experience:

In my vision, I embark on a journey and followed a path. At one point, I passed by an old, apparently wise and benevolent, man who instructed me to follow a certain itinerary. Sometime afterwards, I encountered a beautiful mansion and I entered it. There I was greeted by a host of lovely maidens who invited me to a feast. I joined in and forgot the path that I was supposed to follow.

Reflecting upon the experience afterward made me learn something about myself.

A special kind of inner action that is specifically related to healing are visions in which the drinker experiences himself as seeing the cells and inner structures of her or his body, travels inside them and experiences them to be mended and put back in shape; there are cases in which this operation is conceived of as being applied to one's DNA (see, for instance, Topping 2002; for analogous indigenous reports, see Reichel-Dolmatoff 1981; as well as the discussion in Narby 1998). For some, this process is experienced as carried out by the brew itself, for others the actor is the drinker him or herself, inspired by the brew and invested and guided by special powers and sensitivities. Typically, in such cases drinkers also feel themselves gaining information about the structure and function of the body.

Interaction

Closely related to enactment are visions of interaction. Whereas in enactment, the person under the effect of ayahuasca is the main actor, in interaction, the action is a joint engagement in which both the drinker and other agents take part. There are also interactive visions in which, by and large, the drinker is passive, and other persons, beings, or creatures that appear in the vision undertake the bulk of action. A Brazilian man with extensive experience with the brew furnished the following narrative. The vision at hand took place after this person had (actually) been stung by two wasps. He was in agony and was served with ayahuasca, and then (in his own words): "I saw two beautiful women who sucked the wasp poison out of the two sides of my nose. They passed it to my mouth and told me to spit. I did this and was, in reality, cured."

Several of my informants and I have experienced what is conceived as a magical operation. In my own case, several figures surrounded me and a very fine

veil was spread over me and I let myself be carried into the realms of enchantment. On another occasion in which I was not feeling well a helping being appeared and presented me with a vial containing a soothing balm. I have heard of similar reports from other persons.

A visionary experience that is bound to have great transformative impact is that of self-death and rebirth. In visions of this kind the person who has partaken of ayahuasca feels that he or she is going to die, or actually that he or she does undergo death. Either just before this happens, or perhaps when this does happen, the drinker experiences rebirth. The experience is usually exhilarating, and those who undergo it equate it with salvation. Following are two examples of grand visions whose theme is a process of death and rebirth that leads to salvation. A South American psychologist who partook of ayahuasca only once reported the first to me, in a session conducted in a private home; a European woman partaking of the brew with a traditional healer in the Peruvian Amazon reported the second:

The scene was that of a grand Aztec ceremony. Human beings were being sacrificed and I was one of those thus designated. I first considered resisting, but soon I realized that this would be of no avail. Thus, I altered my attitude and willingly let the priests in charge carry me to the top of the pyramid. There I was placed on the altar and the priests were above me, to take my heart. Without any coercion, I was offering myself. With this, my entire feeling changed radically. From a terrifying scenario of torture and death it all turned into a wonderful process of rebirth and salvation.

The scene was that of a religious Egyptian ritual in the course of which I saw myself being sacrificed. A priest bent over me with a knife and cut my breast. At first, I thought to resist, but then I gave up. Subsequently, I had an out-of-body experience in which I inspected myself from above, and saw my heart being taken out. In its place was the sun, which was giving light and life to everything. Realizing this, and in order not to blind the other people present, I fainted.

Interestingly, a very similar report is given in Wolf (1992), a book which my informants had not heard of.

Mentation

Very often, ayahuasca drinkers report that the brew endows them with remarkable mental lucidity and makes their minds run faster and in a more creative manner. As a result, drinkers feel that their power of ideation and understanding is greatly enhanced. With this, all sorts of new ideas come up through people's minds. Many of these have to do with the individual's own life. Thus, the ayahuasca experience presents people with what may be likened to a deep self-search and psychological analysis. I can attest that after the first time I partook of the brew, I felt that I had gained more insight than I had in several years of classical psychoanalysis. I have heard the same appraisal from several of my informants.

Often, ayahuasca makes people entertain metaphysical ideas (see Shanon 1998a). Typically, these are in line with what is known as "perennial philosophy" (Huxley 1944). In particular, the appreciation that all that exists is harmoniously

interconnected is very common. As noted earlier, this often puts the drinker's own being in a new perspective. This involves putting things in proportion, modifying the magnitude and import one lends to one's problems and needs, and is usually ensued with sentiments of appreciation, humility, and gratitude. All this is likely to set the ground for psychological growth and change.

The Religious and Spiritual Dimension

As noted above, an important facet of the ayahuasca experience is the spiritual and religious dimension. In all traditional and institutionalized contexts of ayahuasca, the consumption of the brew is a sacrament: a sacred ritual. It is not for nothing that psychoactive plants have been called "plants of the gods" (Schultes and Hoffmann 1979) and that for many the term entheogen (i.e., "generating the god within"; see Ruck et al. 1979; Ott 1996) is currently replacing the older and, to some, pejorative terms "hallucinogenic" and "psychedelic" (for discussions of the spiritual dimensions in conjunction with ayahuasca healing, see Mabit, Giove and Vega 1996; Mercante 2006).

What the experience of encountering the divine means is a very private matter which each individual has to determine and settle alone. Whatever the manner and the mode of its interpretation, the experience is bound to have great impact on people. Often this impact is long lasting, resulting in radical changes in people's belief systems, attitudes, and behavior. Personally, if I were to pick the single most important effect of ayahuasca on my life (there were many and the choice of one is not at all easy), I would say that before my encounter with the brew I was an atheist. I used to define myself as a nineteenth century middle-European-like intellectual who is a devout atheist with a strong affinity to Jewish history and its scholarly tradition. Now, a decade and a half afterward, I am no longer one. Likewise, a significant number of informants I have interviewed indicated that the main lesson that they received from ayahuasca was religious or spiritual. "Ayahuasca showed me that God exists," "I have come to appreciate the place of the sacred in human life," "I have encountered the divine," are all statements I have heard more than one person say. There are many individuals who, as a direct consequence of their experience with ayahuasca, underwent a radical religious or spiritual conversion. Often, the transformative impact of ayahuasca is long lasting and its effects remain throughout the course of a person's entire life.

By way of marking the direct link between the religious and spiritual sentiments and the visions, let me cite an episode recounted to me by one of my informants when describing the greatest impact ayahuasca had on her life. The informant said that the most important thing she learned from her experiences with ayahuasca was appreciating that God exists. To my asking how this came about, she replied by telling me of her seeing, with open eyes, the trees in the garden being interlinked by a web of translucent lines of light. This web, she realized, interlinks everything and sustains all of existence. With this, her theistic credence was kindled. I shall

note that the seeing, with open eyes, of such a web of lines of light is extremely common with ayahuasca (For similar descriptions in the context of the dealing with a severe medical condition, see Topping 1998, 1999).

Next, let me recount an episode of my own. The vision was among the most powerful I have had with ayahuasca, and had a long-term effect on me. It took place in a session held with indigenous people in the Putumayo region in southern Colombia. I was offered a large dosage of the brew and the effect came quickly: Immediately I felt I was thrown up into a realm high above the planet and found myself in the midst of what I interpreted to be a cosmic lottery. My understanding was that my entire existence, both physical and mental, was at stake: If I played it right, I would be saved, if not—I would lose everything and perish. In order to redeem myself, I began to sing. There was no reflection involved in this decision, nor any recourse to past experience with ayahuasca (as would be the case today). For 6 or 8 h I continuously sang the praises of God. The words that spontaneously came out of my mouth were (in Spanish) *Gloria a Dios* (in English, “Glory to God”); the melody was being composed as it was being sung. As I was singing, I found myself surrounded by an immense choir of angels; I was taking the leading role and they were accompanying me. The music was exceedingly beautiful. Every now and then the choir was joined by guest groups that came in, performed, and then left. One such group that especially impressed me was one of Black, very sensuous, players. The music they played was very different from that sung by the angels, but it all fit very well and the ultimate meaning and purpose of it all was one and the same: “Hallelujah,” that is, the singing of God’s praises. Since then, I have been singing; both when I partake of ayahuasca and on many occasions in the context of my regular life.

Light

Light permeates the ayahuasca experience. As explained in Shanon (2002a), light constitutes both the most rudimentary and the most powerful ayahuasca visualizations; light is also a common feature of the visions themselves. In fact, I have heard it said that in its very essence, the ayahuasca experience is an experience of light. A distinct and very powerful experience characteristic of ayahuasca is the seeing of what may be characterized as the “supreme light.” By way of example, let me cite the report of a European woman furnished to me in response to my questioning about the most remarkable experience she had with ayahuasca:

In front of me was a most brilliant source of light. Like a lantern of many, many facets. I knew that were I to look at it straight ahead, I would collapse and perhaps die. Thus, I turned my head. During this experience, I felt as if I was losing my sense of self and the faculty of memory.

Another example is that of a young European man who, following his first ayahuasca vision, in which I was present too, emotionally declared: "I saw God!" To my query as to what that meant, he replied:

I was in a region which was pure and perfect, full of light and love, and I was healed.

I looked at the skies up there and the heavens parted. There came a ray of light and it struck my heart. With this I was healed.

Overt Behavior

The ayahuasca experience is not confined to the inner provinces of the mind; it also has overt, publicly observable manifestations. The most notable of these is singing. As already noted above, singing can have great psychological and therapeutic impact. Indeed, singing is the primary tool of healing that the traditional ayahuasqueros use. Throughout the Amazonian region, it is being said: *el que canta, el que cura*, he who sings is he who heals. In the anthropological literature the focus is on the singing as it affects those who listen to it (see, for instance, Bellier 1986; Dobkin de Rios and Katz 1975; Hill 1992; and Luna 1992). However, no less powerful is the effect of singing on those who produce the music, whether they are healers or not. I know more than one person who vouched that ayahuasca made her or him sing and, consequently, introduced a most meaningful change in his or her life.

General Typological Summary

The following summary highlights the principles governing the moments of psychological and therapeutic significance during the course of the ayahuasca experience. In terms of organization, the following exposition is somewhat different from that of the preceding sections, which were ordered in terms of the different dimensions or domains of experience.

First is the affective impact. The very experiencing of physical and psychological well being and of positive affects may, in itself, have significant psychological and therapeutic impact on people. This is especially true for sentiments such as bliss and marvel and of attitudinal reactions such as appreciation and gratitude, as well as of rapture and spiritual uplifting. In addition, such affects and attitudinal reactions can entail changes in people's belief systems and outlook.

Second is the experiential level. As in ordinary life, so with ayahuasca: Going through powerful experiences can have great impact on people. The impact is especially forceful with difficult experiences. Confronting such experiences and overcoming the ordeals that they present constitute veritable tests and achievements. The experiences often force people to reevaluate what is really meaningful

to them in their lives and they often reveal, trigger, or generate personal resources that can become permanent psychological assets.

An experiential effect to be singled out is that of being connected to that which is sensed to be the source of all vital energy, the ultimate *fons et origo* of all things. Regardless of how one conceptualizes this, the experience has a powerful, direct, and unmediated curative and transformative effect.

One thing the visions do is “showing.” Looking at one’s own life, past and present, as an observer, contemplating it and reflecting upon it is prone to be instructive. The visions can also instruct by actual teaching and guidance. Both in conjunction with the visions and apart from them, ayahuasca induces enhanced ideation, and hence reflection and insight. Through these, people can arrive at novel, meaningful understandings, both psychological and intellectual. Especially powerful are the spiritual and religious experiences that ayahuasca induces. These can effectuate radical changes in people’s beliefs systems and their effects can be long lasting. Lastly, the manifest behaviors that ayahuasca facilitates—notably, singing—can have very significant psychological and transformative effects.

Closing, I would like to point out that none of the effects I have noted is automatic. It is not the case that ayahuasca, in and of itself, heals people, transforms them, and makes their lives better. The special experiences that ayahuasca induces present people with possibilities and potentials. It reveals to them sentiments, states of minds, situations, ideas, and patterns of behavior that they may have not encountered or thought of before. Whether all this will have an enduring effect depends on the individual drinker, not on ayahuasca. It is up to each person to gage what ayahuasca has shown to him or her, judge its value and significance, and act, or not act, upon it. Yes, ayahuasca is a great teacher and healer, but the ultimate responsibility for psychological growth and cure remains with each one of us.

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