Ayahuasca, Ecology and Indigeneity

What do we talk about when we talk about ayahuasca? What questions are thrown up? What problems, dilemmas, reflections, solutions? What does ayahuasca mean?

Ayahuasca has grown tremendously in just a few years. My first encounter with it was as yage in the exchange of letters between William Burroughs and Allen Ginsberg. Burroughs set out to Central and South America in 1953 on the scent of a little-known brew that enabled telepathy: ‘When I started looking for Yage I was thinking along the line the medicine men have secrets the whites don’t know about’ (2006: 81). Ginsberg, drinking ayahuasca in Peru seven years later, presents its allure as a lost alchemy, a poetic secret. There is an intrepid, trailblazing tone to their letters.

In the summer of 2013 filmmaker Michael Wiese, who first encountered ayahuasca as a potential cure for his Parkinson’s (a very successful one, it turns out), said to his audience: ‘all of us here – having drunk ayahuasca or not – have been touched by ayahuasca’. Compelling words, I felt at the time, stretching beyond an expectantly sympathetic (and enthusiastic) audience.

There is clearly something meaningful about ayahuasca, some resonance, some worth. Ayahuasca winds through our world at many levels, energising ideas, ethics, politics and visions. I find it significant that a bitter brew from the Amazon touches so many areas that seem so relevant in this jagged modern age. Ayahuasca is not a technology we are familiar with. It is a science unlike what we are taught about science. It is a medicine not prescribed by doctors, not concocted in a lab. It is an unlikely source of knowledge and experience.

When people talk about ayahuasca, they tend to ask questions that I am in the habit of asking. They consider things that they consider worthy for consideration; which are things that I also consider worthy for consideration. I consider them important. I am therefore happy that this interest in ayahuasca has grown as I continue to be fascinated by the implications of its growth and the conversations that arise.

There is a sense of *enchantment* about ayahuasca that we are encouraged to grow out of as we leave childhood. Wizards, Indians, magic potions and witches’ brews, spells and incantations, strange beasties in the jungle. But these are fairy stories! Adventures in
Wonderland. Stories of good witches and bad witches who send spells to each other. The hero who is helped by a talking cat. It is an enchantment that animates and stirs the imagination. It creeps through our solid structures of reality, compelling us to consider the structures from a slightly altered perspective.

Ayahuasca is referred to as a female, feminine, form. I likewise perceive her as feminine. Feminine wisdom. She is often referred to as a blue spirit or a serpent, even to the suspicious Burroughs: ‘and then this blue spirit got to me and I was scared and took some codeine and Nembutal’ (2006: 179). She is experienced as a counterpoint to some of the more aggressive and destructive aspects of our culture – yet she can also be aggressive and destructive. She challenges some of our most basic assumptions about nature – about reality. The experience of a wise and conscious universe. A different vision of the world. A strange and alluring magic.

And yes, ayahuasca is a drug. Of course it is a drug. It is a drink made from plants and water. No faith required. No credo. Just drink it, as Terence would say, and then make up your mind. That is the power. There is a long tradition in the technology of brewing. It is a subtle chemistry. There is also a long tradition of navigating the physical and mental landscape of the drink, anticipating its effects on the body and the imagination.

Yet as a drug it commands a particular language. Ayahuasca is not sold in pill form, nor bought in a can at the corner store, nor smuggled into nightclubs. It is rare to read an account of someone chowing on ayahuasca at home on a Friday night after the pub. Not a club drug. She requires investment.

I have not drunk ayahuasca, and for all I know the assumptions that I have made about ayahuasca will change when I do drink ayahuasca. I already assume that I should not assume too much about what I already assume about ayahuasca. And even that assumption might change…

So ultimately I am not saying what ayahuasca means. I would not presume to know what she means to other people. I am saying what ayahuasca means to me, how what ayahuasca means to me seems to chime with what she means to others, whether they have drunk or not.

Boundaries are crossed. In order to drink ayahuasca international borders may need to be crossed. Travel, insurance, accommodation must be booked. Time is required. Preparation – perhaps the dieta. The trip begins early and requires attention. And for the most part the
destination is the Amazon, an environment generally different from home. The forest is deep and the river has more traffic than the roads. Colours are intense and much is unfamiliar. This is abundantly clear from the Yage Letters; the experiences of drinking the brew are slight in comparison with Burroughs’ picaresque adventures in Panama, Colombia and Ecuador, his scrapes and tussles, sexual encounters and early explorations into the Interzone of his own roguish mental landscape.

The location of the drinking may be a building open to the air yet enclosed, never distant from trees and smells and noises. It is exotic. Things are manifestly different – not fewer things but different things. A group gathers. Trust of strangers is thus required, and trust in particular in the ayahuasquero. Yet there is an invitation to trust, as the tradition of ayahuasca is old and legitimate. It is not illegal. The cops won’t bust down the door. The circle is made to be as safe as possible. The setting of the gathering will have a large influence upon the experience. It cannot be removed from the experience. The setting is the experience.

Things are revealed – the body and the mind are not separate as the nausea and vomiting may come from deep within the psyche. The chants or rattles become physical, visual, material. An environment that is already strange becomes radically stranger. Further boundaries are crossed. Some kind of dialogue unlike a day-today dialogue occurs, an internal dialogue, within the group, with the ayahuasquero, with the trees and animals, with the visions behind closed eyes.

Every experience is recounted in a different way but there is a commonality to the descriptions that I feel immediately compelling. It is a sense that things are not quite what they normally seem. There is an invitation to experience a state of existence quite unlike other states, to consider the value of this state of existence beyond the night of the drinking, to recognise that the forces experienced are operational throughout our lives, not just in the mode of altered perception. Harrowing or joyful, there is a consensual sense that the blooming, buzzing confusion experienced on a night in the jungle is not a different reality, but a part of our reality that we are trained to dismiss as a different reality, as a fantasy reality. That which is fantastic is no mere fantasy. Life is a hero’s journey, a fairy tale.

Thus ayahuasca and other plants and plant preparations are known as teachers. Something transformational occurs with the greater experience of ayahuasca that activates a re-evaluation of some foundational principles upon which our industrialised modern societies are based. This is the central focus of Ralph Metzner’s stirring introduction to Sacred Vine of
Spirits: Ayahuasca (2005), and it is a sentiment reflected in accounts of ayahuasca experiences. Again, Burroughs puts it in his own sardonic style: ‘Yage is it. It is the drug really does what the others are supposed to do. This is the most complete negation possible of respectability’ (2006: 180).

Green pervades. No account that I have read or heard fails to evoke a profound vegetal dimension to the experience – a sense of astonishing interpenetration of human and plant biology. Dennis McKenna (2012: 432-439), for example, describes an experience after drinking ayahuasca of entering the body of the trees, getting smaller and smaller – cellular, molecular – until passing through the very process of photosynthesis. Such a profound experience cannot be separated from a sense of our relationship with the natural world in which we live. It is a botanical experience. It is an ecological experience.

This seems to me an integral aspect of the whole paradigm of ayahuasca; at least, this is the narrative that sings to me from the numerous accounts. I am fascinated by the growth of ecological and environmental discussions and activities that are sprouting from the experience of ayahuasca. There is, I feel, a tremendous value in this. As Metzner indicates, the experience of ayahuasca and other plant teachers problematizes many of the assumptions upon which our cultures are based. Ayahuasca interrogates the long-held assumption that the natural world is not conscious, that any meaningful dialogue with the landscape is at best romantic, at worst pathological; that natural resources are for the taking; that to be human is to participate by default in massive environmental damage. Ayahuasca thus questions the concomitant ease with which rich, thriving ecosystems of great biodiversity may be reduced to sterile wastelands in the pressure to obtain resources. Terence McKenna often suggested that psychedelics (especially tryptamines) were tools to help us find a way out of the mess. This is a possibility with ayahuasca, as it emerges from the very biological, geographical and ethnic contexts that are under greatest threat from modernity.

I am drawn to these narratives because I genuinely consider plant-induced altered states of consciousness in the woods at night to be amongst the most important and transformative events of my life. I have invested myself deeply into the state of being that is the woodland. I have evoked the spirit of ayahuasca whilst gazing at the dark trees flickering in the fire light. What do I know of her? What has she said to me through those who have drunk her and described their experiences? What vision of the world is described that parallels the visions of the world that I describe from my own experiences?
The true impact of this involvement with trees came whilst I was writing my latest book, *Imaginal Landscapes* (2014). This woodland nature is how Swedenborg presents human existence – indeed all existence. Life and death grow in and out of each other in such a way that life is death and death is life. The image of the tiny acorn sprouting into a mighty oak is challenged – nothing to everything then back to nothing – as the woodland presents a different picture. A tree falls and the branches become vertical – they are now trees. A tangle of roots exposed when it fell slowly develops into up-growing trees. Ancient ivy around an oak becomes oaken, incorporated into the oak’s massive structure. These rigid divisions are challenged by Swedenborg and by night-time magic in a woodland. It is a vision that challenges our most deeply-held understanding of the dynamic opposition of life and death. Oblivion to existence to oblivion. The *imaginal*, as so poetically related by James Hillman, is where fact and fiction, reality and fantasy, life and death, dream and waking, all swirl together in a baffling state of enchantment.

I find a relationship here with Patrick Harpur’s book *Daimonic Reality*. He makes his own distinction between Spirit and Soul. Spirit is the urge towards perfection – the impulse towards light and clarity. It is a sensation traditionally evoked by monotheism. Christhood as perfection. It is a masculine, Saturnine principle, guiding the individual and the collective onwards, upwards in a trajectory of yearning. Such a driving principle can translate into the spirit of progress, of repeated waves of modernity. This is our cultural paradigm. Woodlands are cleared of fallen branches; the forest floor is sterile. Mountains are valued not as the dwelling-places of ancestors, but as repositories of minerals. The forests are immensely valued, but as a resource, or as a layer of clothing to be stripped to reveal the rich oil beneath the soil. We place immense value in the natural world, but a value such as Smaug places in his treasure hoard, and like Smaug we fight tooth and nail to own such commodities. Our western culture is one of Light. It is the principle upon which we judge wisdom, comfort and safety. To be enlightened is to see the light, to see the truth, to banish the shadows. No dark corners remain in our houses. The streets at night are ablaze. The stars are hidden in the loom. We are safe from the unknown. This is the spirit of Spirit.

Yet such a spirit accommodates only uneasily the Soul. Soul is feminine and androgynous, mischievous, mercurial, unclear, dark, compellingly un-perfect. Soul is undervalued, rejected, cast aside. Soul ripples in the back-eddies of moonlit waters. Soul is pagan, daimonic, sensual and sexual.
The story of ayahuasca is, I feel, a soul-story. Ayahuasca is witchy bitchy river water swirling mysteriously, muddy and smoky in a battered plastic bottle. Visible songs guide the drinkers. The old Indian with a Pepsi T-shirt, denim shorts and flip-flops blows tobacco smoke over the bubbling brew, adding beakers of murky water, adding sticks to the fire. Hidden memories spring from the darkness; shadows emerge from forgotten corners of the psyche. The trees vibrate with magic. Boundaries are blurred. Is the tree living or dying? The roots of all these trees are enmeshed below ground like the branches above. Everything is alive! Are the leaves on that tree waving at me? Are those patterns in my vision illusion or something more than illusion? Is the whole experience in the jungle an illusion?

Attention is focussed on the trees. Trees are felled. Huge swathes of forest are cut down. This is horrible, wrong. How dare they? How dare we? How dare I? Am I contributing to this destruction? Yes. How can I not contribute? What system do I belong to, and what power do I have within that system to reduce the destruction? Am I destructive? Yes. To whom? To family, friends, strangers, myself. I fell trees. We all fell trees. I destroy. We all destroy. Life is destruction. How can we limit the damage?

Ayahuasca is not only called a teacher, she is a stern teacher. Most accounts describe such dialogues of self-evaluation. Psychology becomes ecology. Ecology becomes ethics. Any system of ethics that does not hold ecology, environment, the earth, at its core becomes sham. A crazy mirror is held up to the drinker, reflecting grinning monsters and demons, inspiring a dialogue between the self and the self, a scrutiny of the self’s relationship with the community, with society, with the activities and principles that are central to our society. The soul-journey of ayahuasca is thus an investigation into the values of western culture. As such, the whole experience of ayahuasca – this shamanic brown jungle brew – is an experience of the idea of indigenous.

I have often asked my students to discuss their understanding of indigenous? What do they think about when they hear or use the term? Who is indigenous here? Who is not? Why not? There is expected divergence of opinion; yet there is also consensus. It is an important question, as a consideration of the indigenous is a consideration of fundamental questions of identity – our relationship with the land, with the past, with each other.

‘Indigenous’ is a bundle of values corresponding to absence. To list the values associated with indigenous is to identify qualities lacking in the non-indigenous. This is the distinction far more than ethnicity, race, language or geography. As such, and especially present within
the extensive literature of ayahuasca, indigenous represents the desire to incorporate the
values embedded within the term indigenous. How do they live? What do they do that which
we do not? How can we learn from them? Indigenous represents what is absent from western
culture to the extent that the term ‘western’ means, precisely, that which is not indigenous.

This is a delicate matter. My colleague David Stirrup illustrates the tendency amongst
white European political groups to appropriate the term indigenous in order to justify ethnic
supremacy and anti-immigration rhetoric. Indeed the figure of a Native American warrior in
full headdress has been used in Sweden and Switzerland to vindicate this far-right agenda of
‘native’ people resisting the settlers. Stirrup explains why the BNP are not ‘Indigenous rights
activists’: ‘That aspiring political representatives in one of the most successful colonizing
nations in the history of the world should demand protection from the fruits of its own
success is, to say the least, highly ironic’ (2013: 67). He argues with regards the Finnish
disrespect for the indigenous Sami people that ‘the Far Right’s interest in indigeneity begins
and ends with self-preservation’ (2013: 68). The protections afforded by the legal definitions
of indigeneity risk being undermined by the appropriation of the term by non-indigenous
communities such as the BNP. Whilst far-right groups may demand recognition of their own
indigeneity, such an appeal impoverishes the very meaningfulness of the term for, precisely,
indigenous people.

So I am not asking why I am not indigenous. I am interrogating the dazzling array of
values associated with the term. I am deliberately not avoiding generalisations, as the terms
‘western’ and ‘indigenous’ are unavoidable generalisers. What are these values?

Indigenous signifies people who belong. Theirs is a community, whilst ours is fragmented
society. Theirs is a connection to the land, an innate sense of ecology, a vision of balance and
health. Indigenous is authentic. It resists the dominating culture of Gringoland. They are
colonised not colonisers, oppressed not oppressors, victims not victimisers, natural not
artificial, instinctively spiritual not religious. Their homes, lands and lives are threatened by
loggers, cattle farmers, mining companies, petroleros and corporations, who are our
ambassadors in their lands. They value tradition, and their ancestors are present in dreams
and visions. They still respect the crazy shaman. Their doctors are healers. Their medicine is
ritual. They value the living forest, rivers, plains and mountains, not the gimmicks, gadgets
and plastic toys of western culture. They have something we lack. Indigenous is not western
because western is not indigenous. The terms are value-filled and have grown to evoke opposing value systems.

Of course this is not accurate. The Inca were a dominator society, creating a vast empire on the scale of the Roman. Moctezuma’s Aztecs were a bloodthirsty lot. Indigenous people cut down trees and are nasty to each other, have mobile phones, drink Coke and eat burgers. There are ayahuasqueros who drink the brew and do great mischief, or who provide deliberately dodgy brews. There are scoundrels and bastards in all cultures and all societies. Five centuries of colonial and corporate abuse of indigenous cultures, however, reveal that western culture has built scoundrelry and bastardness into its foundational principles.

Furthermore, the values that are ascribed to the term indigenous may not be present in indigenous cultures nor recognised as values. What we may perceive wistfully as the moral attribute of sharing may be a simple strategy for survival. The ethic of harmonious living with the environment again may not be recognised as an ethic at all, but as a straightforward necessity to guarantee natural resources for the community.

Drinking ayahuasca does not make one indigenous, no matter how many times one returns to the lodge in Iquitos. What prevents me being indigenous is, crucially, the fact that I am not indigenous. Neither am I Russian nor a woman. And yet we may consider the bundle of values associated with our understanding of indigenous, and question whether we cannot attempt to embody those values. This contemplation of values may, therefore, urge us away from a pretence at indigeneity either for belligerent political agendas – like the BNP – or for fashion agendas, such as wearing ‘ethnic’ clothing so as to seem more groovy. Are those values that we identify in others (appropriately or not) achievable? This, to me, is the heart of the matter.

Ayahuasca is deep immersion in indigeneity, which is thus the radical experience of the Other. Yet rather than mourning our lack of such values, the spirited debates surrounding ayahuasca reveal to me a desire to make those values our own. Thus ayahuasca encourages – at least should encourage – a scrutiny of the very activity of drinking ayahuasca. As such I was heartened to participate in an earnest debate at Breaking Convention in 2013 about, precisely, the impact of ayahuasca tourism. Tread gently. Be respectful. What litter are you dropping? What are the consequences of more gringos exchanging dollars for visions? How is the act of drinking part of a problem as much as a solution? Such questions are immensely important, as they bring the act into sharp focus against a backdrop of centuries of injustice.
and brutality. Is the growth of ayahuasca in the western mind another act of colonial cultural appropriation? Are the ayahuasqueros being lured away from their traditional roles as curanderos and healers and active members of the community in order to cook up the brew for strangers? Iquitos was at the heart of the rubber boom a century ago, a period characterised by exploitation of natural resources, contamination of the ecosystem and abuses of the population. Iquitos is now at the heart of the aya boom. How different is the process? How can drinkers respond to such intense questions and yet still receive the gift of aya visions? Can the act of drinking ayahuasca mitigate the act of drinking ayahuasca by compelling the drinker to question the act of drinking ayahuasca?

I am emboldened by discussions of the spirits of the woodlands, as it is a language I have secretly spoken all my life. I have not experienced in a dazzling vision the female form of ayahuasca, and yet I have evoked her spirit and have meditated long with her. Slowly, vine-twistingly, an experiential magic that has long been mistrusted, vilified, pathologised and criminalised in our thrusting brave societies is returning. It is possible to belong, to be part of the land, the community, to respect the muddy rivers, snake-eyed trees and ancient societies of our own homes, to respect magic and the ancestors, to heal. Above all to heal.


