The Healing Power of the Icaros: A Phenomenological Study

The focus of this study is to explore the phenomenon of the healing with an *icaro* during an ayahuasca ceremony in the tradition of Peruvian *mestizo vegetalismo*, as well as to identify key aspects of the musical perception to which healing meanings are attributed.

Participants in this study are five men and women with extensive experience with brew in this context, each of whom was able to identify the icaro in the recording of the ceremony where the phenomenon emerged. The data collection procedures include a written report of the experience, and two in-depth interviews. The analysis employs the method of Descriptive Phenomenology for Psychology, as developed by Giorgi (1985; 1987; 1997; 1998; 2000).

Ten months of fieldwork in the areas of Tarapoto and Pucallpa were required to collect the data. Thirty-seven ceremonies were sound-recorded, with a total of 239 attendees. The emergence of the phenomenon was charted within the demographic parameters of sex and age. A formal musical analysis of the icaros identified by participants is included in the study as complimentary data. Additional data collected during the fieldwork include 120 hours of recordings of icaros sung by different ayahuasqueros, and in-depth interviews of six of them on their perspectives of how the icaros heal.

The study is expected to be completed by December 2007. While I originally planned for six months of field work, it ended up being ten months of intensive research, personal challenge, and a first-hand understanding of this tradition—both its social context and cosmology. The financial support of the Kranzke grant was invaluable in allowing the completion of that stage, as well as opening compelling research possibilities beyond this study. •

Susana Bustos is a clinical psychologist and music therapist from Chile. Her work on drug abuse and on the therapeutic aspects of expanded states of consciousness dovetailed with her passion for music and song during her first journey to the Peruvian Amazon in 1989, where she experienced an icaro sung by Rose Giove, one of the founders of Takiwasi.

The Ayahuasquero and Personality: A Study

The Kranzke scholarship was instrumental in helping complete my study of the personality traits and characteristics of frequent ayahuasca drinkers in North America. This research used the most accepted and validated of the personality assessments, the MMPI and MMPI-2. This research built on previous findings on personality done with smaller, less-known measures of personality conducted with frequent drinkers of ayahuasca done in South America within the Uni De Vegetal (UDV), the first and largest of the religions that have formed their own communities centered on the use of ayahuasca. By studying a North American population that was not living within or closely tied to participation in a religious community, it was hoped that a clearer view of the personalities of ayahuasca drinkers outside of these religious and cultural settings could be created.

Thirty-four frequent North American drinkers of ayahuasca were administered the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory (MMPI-2). The MMPI personality description for the group was within normal limits of personality. The responses of the ayahuasca drinkers were not found to have a high correlation with the scores of drug and alcohol abusers. All scores, with the exception of low aggression, were within normal ranges of personality. No overall difference between the high and low use groups was found. The study found personality traits of North American ayahuasca drinkers to be within normal limits of personality. The study strongly suggests that frequent drinking of ayahuasca in the North American population has produced no
effects on their personalities of clinical concern.

I started this project in an attempt to give something back to a field that I had found to be instrumental to the healing of many people. I felt that I had the ability to add one small piece of solid research information to what was known about ayahuasca as a way of giving something back to the community that could be built on by others in the continuing effort to evaluate the effects and healing potential of ayahuasca. At the time the Kranzke scholarship award notice arrived, my dissertation chair and I had discovered that instead of working with just 10 main scales of the MMPI-2, we were probably going to have to expand the study to 123 scales. At the time I was hand-scoring the tests, and had spent weeks on these 10 scales, and now I was faced with hand-scoring and calculating over thirty-five thousand data points. The scholarship allowed all participants’ responses to be sent for computerized scoring and extended analysis by the developer of the MMPI-2, saving many hundreds of hours of labor, and producing clean, error-free data. The money paid for the statistical software used to analyze the data, create graphical displays, and make it understandable and presentable. When our main computer was hit by a virus that made it unusable, we were able to replace it, restore the data and move forward. The scholarship paid for paper, printer cartridges, stamps, an editor and filing fees for the completed dissertation.

The Kranzke scholarship allowed this research project to move forward through delays and setbacks that, although normal to the research process, often mean many projects are not completed or fully developed. The scholarship helped give me the ability to contribute something back to the community, and it is my hope that this spirit of gratitude and generosity may continue.

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Psychological Variables Predicting Transformative and Difficult Unresolved Ayahuasca Experiences: A Pilot Study

This pilot study aims to explore a possible connection between distinct psychological variables and subjective reports or themes experienced during shamanic ayahuasca journeys. While Westerners report ayahuasca elicited transformative experiences for journeymen, some re-traumatization occurs in a minority of cases. This investigation attempts to identify a psychometrically sound and reliable method for predicting the quality of the experiences people may have on ayahuasca and possibly other kinds of hallucinogenic drugs used in healing or experimental settings. The natural extension of this work is in the area of harm reduction. Investigation into the mysteries of psychedelic/entheogenic plants and substances has enjoyed a tenuous resurgence in recent years. Developing a clinically valid and reliable method for predicting a participant’s reaction to a psychedelic substance has potentially vast implications for the acceptance and proliferation of research with these substances.

I am truly honored to be a 2007 recipient of the Kranzke Scholarship. At the awards banquet I was afforded an opportunity to speak briefly about the scholarship and what it means to young researchers and the field of psychedelic studies. This money represents commitment that grassroots supporters like Robert Barnhart have to the cause of psychedelic research. Though organizations like MAPS have made important contributions in the public arena, it is really the people behind the scenes, with their courage and tenacity, who despite overwhelming odds continue to champion the use of entheogens as important methods of healing.

In person, Robert Barnhart is a kind and thoughtful man whose easy-going nature belies the impact he has had on my research and that of other Kranzke winners past and present. He allows the sum of our efforts to be greater than the individual parts.