

“Why do You Keep Drinking **Ayahuasca** Over and Over Again?”

By Adam Elenbaas



Adam Elenbaas
adam.elenbaas@gmail.com
www.fishersofmenbook.com

In what was no more than eighteen hours spent in ceremonies during my first trip to Iquitos... I managed to purge a host of toxic energies from my body and mind.

FIVE years ago I traveled to the Amazon to drink ayahuasca. After my first three ceremonies drinking “the medicine,” my life was irreversibly changed. I would never be the same person again. In what was no more than eighteen hours spent in ceremonies during my first trip to Iquitos, Peru, I managed to purge a host of toxic energies from my body and mind. These crossed energies included: alcohol abuse, sexual addiction, opiate dependency, religious confusion, and panic attacks. Although my troubles were, in a sense, “instantly cured” by the medicine, I continued to drink ayahuasca in many more ceremonies. Five years and 80 some ayahuasca ceremonies later, having published my first book (a memoir that narrates my ayahuasca journeys), and feeling in the best shape of my life, I have learned how to answer the questions: “Why do you keep doing this? What more healing could you possibly need?”

The first answer I like to give to those questions, most of which come from incredibly smart and sensitive people, is this: “Those are really great questions. Those are questions I’ve thought about in and outside of ayahuasca ceremonies.” The reason it’s important to give this first response is that too often devotees of any religious lifestyle feel offended when people ask questions of their tradition. I’ve learned to appreciate people who question the authenticity of any spiritual tradition. After all, it was the same essential questioning that led me out of the Christian right and into an exploration of mystical religious experiences, and eventually ayahuasca, in the first place. Also, we all know that religious folks often marginalize or exclude other ideas or groups of people. But, by the same token, if skepticism is a regimented way of being or thinking or interacting with people, if cynicism toward religion itself becomes too constant, then it also becomes abstract, dogmatic, impersonal, and ultimately pathological. This leads me to how I answer these questions: *Ayahuasca is not just a medicine and shamans are not just healers. Therefore, you shouldn’t think of ayahuasca as a ‘cure all,’ something you only need to drink a few times and you are cured.*

It is true that shamans throughout history have been largely respected for their ability to diagnose and cure complex ailments in human beings, ecosystems, animals, and other dimensions of reality. In this sense shamans are often called things like “curanderos,” or “paleros” or “ayahuasqueros.” Plant doctors. Ayahuasca doctors. Healers. Shamans are like extra-dimensional practitioners of consciousness, and most usually people going to the Amazon to drink ayahuasca, for example, are seeking “healing” or “clarity” or “transformation,” (all things shamans are experts at providing). However, factors exist today that are radically challenging the traditional patient-doctor shamanic paradigm (how traditional is the patient-doctor relationship in the Amazon, despite the local use of the word “medicine,” anyway?)

The largest factor is the culture of the West: the globalized, internet-ready, urban or sub-urbanite. Only, I’m not talking about ayahuasca or ecotourism. I’ve never criticized anyone for wanting to make a trip to the Amazon to drink ayahuasca. That being said, I am noticing a very real way in which the dialogue between the culture of the West and the shamanic traditions of the jungle are rapidly evolving the entheogenic/ceremonial shamanic paradigm itself. The average ayahuasca pilgrim today comes packed with baggage that is perhaps more uniquely complex than people living in the jungle.

Despite the fact that ayahuasca pilgrims are dealing with issues that shamans might be used to (greed, power, fear, arrogance, etc.) shamans are not always aware of the myriad ways in which these issues weave themselves into modern religious confusion, generational and family karma, technology, economic enmeshing, relationships, and a more overt, daily recognition of a “global” drama that is streaming in the Western news every day. Although shamans have incredible visionary abilities, the remoteness of their location within space and time makes the interactions with modern ayahuasca pilgrims (who are living in a kind of hyper shamanic container every single day) more dynamic, where traditional experiences between natives and shamans had perhaps been more linear, hierarchical or static.

The best example of this from my own journey came from my third year of ayahuasca work. The lodge I had been

visiting was featured very favorably in a major American magazine. Rumor had it that one of the shamans at the lodge had been let go for drinking beer. He was let go by the American owner of the lodge (an alcoholic before “the medicine”) on the grounds that American guests struggling with alcohol addiction, people who had come to purge their addiction, would find this hypocrisy incredibly offensive. Guests could have a “bad” experience. The point here is simple. In the West, for many people, a lifestyle of moderation and substance use is not possible.

It is my opinion that this is because the lifestyle and culture of the West, particularly America, is not a moderate place to begin with. The demons of addiction are in many ways perhaps stronger and different beasts than the “addiction” spirits of the jungle. At this particular lodge it was explicitly stated that the master shamans of the lodge (one an Iquitos

...the world needs healing,
and we can pray for
and assist that healing
by coming together and
doing this work
as a team.

local, and the other the American owner who trained under the Iquitos local) were special specifically because they could address both the timeless maladies of the human spirit and the more complex issues of the modern psyche (a Peruvian/American one, two punch).

At first it was definitely a unique synthesis. During ceremonies I noticed two different styles. Mostly silence from the local, whose *icaros* and healing techniques were deeply archetypal and tended to cut to the core of whatever issue(s) were present. Be it greed or power-lust or arrogance or fear or pain or suffering, or the question “why?” the local shaman had a way of showing me the timelessness of a core “poison” behind all of the particulars. It was like Greek mythology. Simultaneously, the American

shaman did a lot of talking. Speaking more directly to the egos of the guests in the mesa, he would explain spiritual concepts, recommend lifestyle changes, and inspire individual growth and responsibility. “This is YOUR night. These are YOUR demons. UNDERSTANDING flows from the heart. If you connect to your heart, you can understand ALL LEVELS of complexity as the same. We are all ONE!” One shaman did the magic, while the other magically explained the magic, like verbal tai-chi. Both shamans were healing in their own ways.

However, as I watched the camp grow exponentially, and as things like the firing (and eventual rehiring) of the local Iquitos shaman for drinking beer took place, the shamanic one/two combo, at least to me, lost its luster. I would hear contradictory things during ceremony, like, “You people CAN’T do this on your OWN. You can’t become a shaman just because you take some psychedelics at home or have one good ceremony in the jungle. It takes YEARS of training to become an ayahuasca healer like us.” Then, maybe an hour later I would hear something like, “ALL OF US, every last one of us, are shamans. This is YOUR ayahuasca practice time.” Eventually I realized that the synthesis of these two shamans was not as clear as I had thought it was, and certainly not as clear as it was being advertised.

At this particular lodge something interesting was happening. An attempt to blend traditional, patient to practitioner ayahuasca shamanism with something like a personal religious practice (like daily meditation or yoga) was taking place. The only problem was that the shamans were not clearly articulating a vision of the synthesis. It was hard to tell when to think of the shamans as my healers and when to think of them like simple teachers inspiring my personal mastery of the ayahuasca experience. The fact that the popularity of the lodge was growing, its prices increasing, and a cult-like following of the shamans themselves becoming obvious (reminiscent of guru worship) was reason enough for me to leave the lodge during the middle of my fifth visit.

Growing up Protestant Christian, my frustration with this inconsistency invoked memories of having studied Martin Luther and his protestant complaints, the theses he nailed to the doors of the Catholic Church. The figure of the shep-

pard pastor emerged during the Reformation as a religious leader “of the people and for the people.” The question had naturally arisen within me, “Is this place about medicine and healing sickness, or is this a Universalist religious group? If it’s both, then how does it coexist without these contradictions from the shamans’ egos? What does a collective shamanic container end up looking like if there is no central master or healer?”

My feeling now is that it’s important that people drinking ayahuasca to become clear within themselves about how they answer these questions. The truth is that people use ayahuasca to heal and transform, and shamans help with that. Then, as people deepen their relationship to these ceremonies, the experience becomes a meditation practice, a series of yoga asanas, a prayer life, a ritual, and a lifelong study of conscious evolution. Along that path, should extreme difficulty arise, shamanic expertise can still be found from a shaman, and sometimes it can be found within yourself, or perhaps from another ceremonial group member.

My own involvement with ayahuasca recently shifted to a collective model with the Santo Daime. I feel that the Daime is a great example (of many great examples) that are beginning to practice ayahuasca medicine with clear intentions surrounding the religious and regular disciplined use of ayahuasca. The group itself, singing songs together in a circle, all facing inward toward the altar, acts as the shaman. Ritual procedures are put in place to ensure group and individual safety. Elder members of the church (or Godfathers and Godmothers) act as shamanic healers when necessary, and otherwise the focus of the group becomes the silent but mutual supporting of one another throughout a series of personal and collective psychic healings and passages that take place during the ceremony (called a “work”).

Although the Christian symbolism and some of the language of the songs may not resonate with everyone, and I’m certainly not prescribing the Santo Daime religion as the pinnacle of ayahuasca traditions, a few things about the Daime are relevant when trying to answer the questions, “Why do you keep doing this? Aren’t you healed already?”

The first answer that the Daime church provided me is that the world needs healing, and we can pray for and assist that healing by coming together

and doing this work as a team. The second answer the Daime church provided me with is that the personal faith journey is a daily walk. The old saying, “If you got the message, then hang up the phone,” does not apply to drinking ayahuasca. There is no ultimate message or ultimate “healing” at the core of the ayahuasca experience, like a holy grail of cosmic realization or awakening. Instead, there is a unique opportunity to open the mind and body to a powerful level of love and truth. Drinking ayahuasca on a semi-regular basis makes ayahuasca different than a tourist experience, different than a “cure-all medicine” or a vacation from our modern demons. It’s more than just recharging your battery while dipping into the jungles of the numinous. It becomes about simple things. How did I treat my dog and my wife and my family this past month? If I didn’t do so well, maybe tonight I will have some hard work to do, maybe even some purging. If I completed my homework, then maybe tonight I will learn something new or be given a new vision, a new inspiration, something to contribute. For these reasons I believe thousands of people are not just making one trip to the Amazon to drink and be cured, but many trips and an entire “movement” is happening.

Again, I am not suggesting that ayahuasca religions like the Santo Daime or the UDV are the best traditions out there. A great deal of traditional shamanic

groups, like the Temple of the Way of Light, Infinite Light, The Sacred College, and others are beginning to function in exactly the way I’m describing, without using Christian or religious symbolism (like the Daime and UDV do). I spoke with Daniel Pinchbeck at JivaMukti yoga studio in Manhattan this past summer, and he mentioned that the Sequoia in Ecuador also practice communal ayahuasca ceremonies at certain times of the year.

At the end of the day, my point remains the same. Not everybody is an ayahuasca tourist. Not every shaman is a doctor, and ayahuasca is not simply a cure-all. Once this is realized the premise of the questions, “Why keep on doing this? Aren’t you healed?” are exposed. More and more ayahuasca is evolving to be a spiritual discipline, as common and effective as yoga or meditation. Dare I say that ayahuasca for many people these days is sort of like going to the spiritual gym to get an extreme existential workout? To me, that doesn’t cheapen or degrade anything (but I love a good workout!). There is always room to learn and grow, and I don’t think it hurts to face ourselves on a more regular (and less vocational or vacation) basis.

In my book, *Fishers of Men: The Gospel of an Ayahuasca Vision Quest*, I wrote a lot about my Christian upbringing and how it was unraveled so beautifully for me during ceremonies. One of the first truths I learned that changed my life was this: life is already eternal, and there is no prayer you can say or belief you can hold that will make or break that truth. That is the gospel. That is the “good news.” How you deal with the unchangeable, unavoidable good news of redemption, of the fact that you cannot truly die, ever, is what dictates whether your experiences will be heavenly or hellish.

Month by month, and year by year, I still have problems making my life and the lives of others unnecessarily hellish, and I see the same problem in the world I live in. I believe things can get better for all of us. Maybe it’s that I’m just 29 years old, and maybe I’m completely deluded and making no real contributions of positive change in our world yet. But after five years and 80 ceremonies, despite all the inconsistencies and hypocrisies of myself or any shaman or shamanic paradigm, of any lodge or ayahuasca religion in particular, this is why I keep drinking ayahuasca and asking for more love in my heart. •

