

Religions of the Twice-Born:

Northwest Amazonian **Ayahuasca Shamanism** and Near-Death Experience



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READING FOR A Ph.D. in Social Anthropology at Cambridge University, my project falls within the remit of current international multidisciplinary research initiatives directed towards an analysis of the biopsychosocial dynamics of hallucinogenic plant-induced "altered states of consciousness" with a view to developing new therapeutic treatments in the West for a variety of mental disorders. At present this research has specialised in the area of cross-cultural transference of medical knowledge appropriate to the establishment of accelerative pharmacological adjuncts to existing cocaine treatment protocols in Europe and America. However, it is hoped that successes in this field will qualify the use of such treatments in the psychotherapeutic rehabilitation of other substance dependency and depressive disorders.

Background

The successful clinical application of LSD-25 experience in the the psychotherapeutic preparation *for death* of terminally ill cancer patients (Kast, E. 1966; Grof, S. 1977) has led more recently to an examination of the potential of such hallucinogenically induced experiences for *augmenting* conventional analytic psychotherapies aimed at the rehabilitatory preparation *for life* of patients manifesting self-destructive disorders (drug abuse, etc.) (Grof, S. 1975, 1980). The proposed project is intended to explain further the link between certain categories of non-ordinary consciousness and the long-term, psychotherapeutically conducive self-referential "attitude changes" consequent to such experiences. To do this it hypothesises that the efficacy of such experiences in contributing to the rehabilitation particularly of drug dependents rests in large measure on the

explicitly *systemic* insights and cognitive orientations characterising human consciousness in proximity with an immediately perceived threat to its existence (so called "Near-Death Experience," or NDE).

Locale

Fieldwork for this project will be conducted in Iquitos, Peru. Given the high density of shamans inhabiting Iquitos and its jungle environs as a consequence of urbanisation, and the frequency with which a substantial proportion of the general population is involved in ritual/institutionalised near-death-type shamanic experiences (hallucinogenically induced), this Amazonian city presents itself as the ideal setting for research into the biopsychosocial dynamics of shamanistic/near-death attitude changes. Iquitos further satisfies the demands of the proposed research in that shamans are both accessible and open in their

magico-medico-religious practices with regard to local authorities, cosmopolitan health services, "state" religion, and foreign research workers.

More research on the NDE needed

While both ethnopharmacology and ethnopsychiatry, and the associated disciplines of medical anthropology and medical sociology, have made extensive studies of the indigenous therapeutic uses of hallucinogenic plants such as ayahuasca there remains a great deal of work to be done before the knowledge derived from the analysis of ethnomedical approaches may be fully accommodated within the modern clinic and the practice of scientific medicine. In cooperation with the international body of medical doctors, psychologists and anthropologists presently conducting collaborative research towards effecting such a transfer this project will afford a new anthropological explanatory perspective on a core dynamic (NDE) of hallucinogen-based psychotherapies. This may serve to legitimate further the claim that hallucinogenic plants and the indigenous knowledge associated with their cultivation, preparation, and administration have potentially a major role to play in the development of psychopharmacological preventative and alleviative treatments for the sorts of individual and social suffering characteristic of inveterate substance abuse and similarly self-destructive behaviors. In addition, the proposed research will fill a gap in more generally relevant cross-cultural understandings of the nature, role, and function of NDE, a phenomenon the incidence of which inevitably increases in line with the ever-improving resuscitatory technologies of biomedicine (a 1992 survey revealed that 13 million people in the United States alone had undergone some form of NDE). A collaborative presentation of the results of these research initiatives has been entered for the *Hannover 2000 Millennium Exposition*. •

Acknowledgements

On completion the results of the research project will be presented for examination by the Department of Social Anthropology and the Board of Graduate Studies at Cambridge University in the form of a doctoral dissertation not exceeding 80,000 words in length.

I would like to take this opportunity to express my sincerest gratitude to MAPS for offering me a stipend for travel to the Takiwasi Center in Tarapoto, Peru, in the context of my research into the biopsychosocial dynamics of the long-term attitude changes consequent to the ritualised near-death-type experience components of ayahuasca-based healing initiatives.

Ayahuasca in Europe

Alberto Groisman

IN THE END of the 1980s, the Brazilian cults of ayahuasca arrived in Europe. These groups use ayahuasca in a ritual and religious context, with an influence from Amazonian culture, shamanism, esoteric Christianity and Afro-Brazilian cults.

The first of these groups was founded in the 1930s, in Acre, an Amazonian state of Brazil. Nowadays, a branch of this original group, well known as Santo Daime, has more than 20 centres in different European countries.

The arrival and presence of Brazilian ayahuasca cults in Europe is the subject of my Ph.D. thesis, which is expected to be concluded in 2000.

Since October 1996, I have collected data on different aspects of ritual life, social context, motivations and personal perceptions of European participants. Since 1997 I have concentrated my attention on the Dutch Santo Daime groups, as the main study case. When I conclude the data collection in The Netherlands, I will start to research other countries.

The principal elements on which I am focusing in my research are: (a) meaning and impact of the arrival and presence on European territory of these Brazilian groups; (b) cosmological and ritual configuration of the existing centers; (c) influences and changes provided by the European setting in their ritual and doctrine, and (d) the worldview and spiritual style of European participants.

With regard to these aspects, I will analyse: (1) cross-cultural dimensions of the process of organisation of European groups; (2) contrasts and analogies between Brazilian and European styles; and (3) the way by which Christianity in a new sacramental guise is returning to Europe.

I would be grateful with comments and/or any other support to my research. •

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