

## Ideas and reflections associated with **ayahuasca** visions

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**A**YAHUASCA IS FAMOUS  
for the visions it generates.

These have been discussed in the anthropological literature, and increasingly, they receive attention in the non-scientific, popular press. In an earlier report in MAPS as well as elsewhere (Shanon, 1997) I have made the case for a systematic study of the contents of these visions and presented data pertaining to them. These data indicate that common content items appear in the visions of individuals from different personal and cultural backgrounds. The most salient of these are serpents, the large cats (jaguars, tigers and pumas, but not lions), birds and palaces. Other frequently seen items include beings of all sorts, scenes pertaining to ancient civilizations (notably Egypt and the pre-Colombian American high cultures), open landscapes (e.g., large meadows and savannas) as well as celestial and heavenly scenes. Most of the objects seen in the visions are made of gold and gilded material, crystal, precious stones and white cloth. The corpus of ayahuasca visions depicted in *Ayahuasca Visions* (Luna & Amaringo, 1993) exhibit similar patterns. From the point of view of cognitive psychology, such findings are significant because they seem to attest to a level of cognitive universals of a totally new kind. Unlike the universals normally considered in the psychological literature, which have to do with schemes of thought and formal structures, the commonalities manifested in ayahuasca visions have to do with content. Moreover, the content items are specific—they are not general patterns of the drama of human life. In this respect the images differ from the Jungian archetypes which pertain to the different manifesta-

tions of themes such as the great mother, the adventurous youth, the hero, the wise old man, birth and death. Such themes are, of course, part and parcel of the human saga, regardless of place, time, socio-economic affiliation, intellectual level or cultural and educational background. The items commonly found in ayahuasca visions are categorically different. They are specific and non-reducible to the psychology of personality dynamics. As suggested by Huxley (Huxley, 1972), they may be regarded as indicative of layers of the psyche, or perhaps facets of ontology, which have nothing to do with individual psychology.

### Other effects of ayahuasca

Salient as the visions are, they (along with the non-visual "hallucinations" that the brew induces) are not the only effects that ayahuasca induces. Another important facet of the phenomenology of the ayahuasca experience are ideas, insights and reflections. Many individuals report that the brew makes them think faster and be more intelligent. Some persons with extensive experience with ayahuasca even indicated that with time, these ideational effects are more meaningful than the visions. In general, under the effect of ayahuasca, people report that they are more insightful and given to new ideas than usual. Furthermore, it seems that the intoxication makes people more involved with deeper psychological analyses and with philosophical contemplation.

Naturally, the subject matter of thoughts that pass through a person's mind during the intoxication are prone to reflect the interests and concerns this person normally has. Very often, when consuming the brew, people ask for answers or solutions to specific questions or problems that actually bother them in their lives. They often gain insights with respect to personal questions, find answers or solutions that are subsequently applied in their lives, and also find comfort and solace.

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One person with extensive experience with ayahuasca told me that what the brew gives one is access to what he characterized as "divine wisdom." This term, he further explained, denotes all that can be known on any subject. The knowledge to be gained by any particular individual will depend on the interests and wishes of the person in question. "If the person is interested in philosophy he will learn more about philosophy, he wishes to gain understanding about the nature of the human mind he will become wise on that, if what interests him is being a thief, it is this in which he will become more knowledgeable."

This insight notwithstanding, it seems that as with the visions, the ideas entertained during ayahuasca intoxication exhibit some common, interpersonal features. These pertain to the domains being reflected upon, the general types of contents that become significant, and the overall perspectives from which things are being viewed. To my knowledge, this is a topic that has not received any attention or treatment in the scientific literature, neither anthropological nor psychological. The cognitive import of this phenomenon cannot, I think, be overstated.

#### Subject group demographics

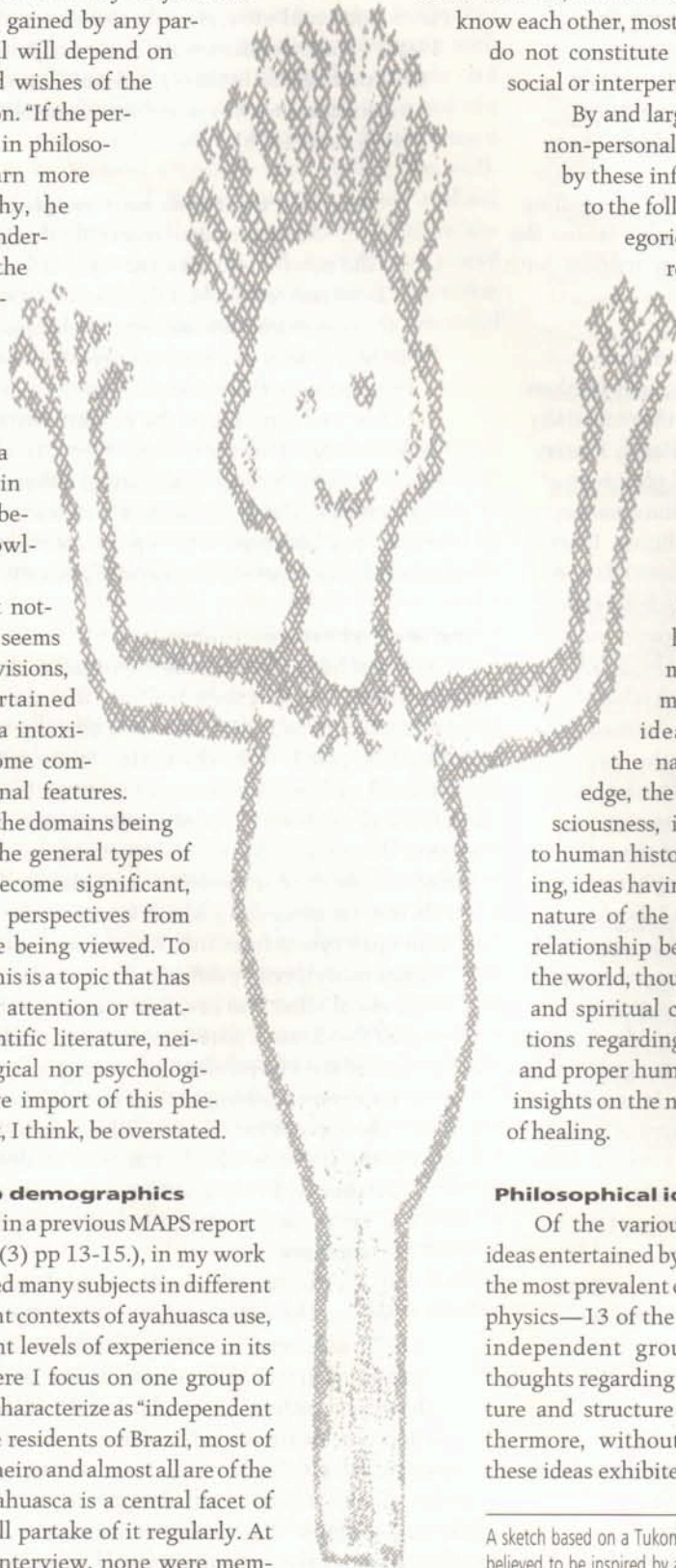
As indicated in a previous MAPS report (*MAPS Bulletin* 7(3) pp 13-15.), in my work I have interviewed many subjects in different places, in different contexts of ayahuasca use, and with different levels of experience in its consumption. Here I focus on one group of subjects which I characterize as "independent drinkers." All are residents of Brazil, most of them of Rio de Janeiro and almost all are of the middle class. Ayahuasca is a central facet of their lives, and all partake of it regularly. At the time of the interview, none were mem-

bers of any institutionalized group or sect. This group of informants is comprised of 21 persons, 15 males and 6 females. The characterization of the informants as a group pertains to the design of the research; while some of these people know each other, most do not and they do not constitute a group in any social or interpersonal sense.

By and large, the ideas of a non-personal nature reported by these informants pertain to the following main categories: metaphysical reflections about the ontology and the structure and meaning of reality, reflections about nature and the phenomenon of life, insights regarding the human predicament and the meaning of life, ideas concerning the nature of knowledge, the mind and consciousness, ideas pertaining to human history and its meaning, ideas having to do with the nature of the Divine and the relationship between God and the world, thoughts of religious and spiritual character, reflections regarding ethical values and proper human conduct, and insights on the nature and praxis of healing.

#### Philosophical ideas

Of the various philosophical ideas entertained by the informants, the most prevalent concerned metaphysics—13 of the members of the independent group entertained thoughts regarding the ultimate nature and structure of reality. Furthermore, without exception, all these ideas exhibited one particular



A sketch based on a Tukonoan wall decoration believed to be inspired by ayahuasca visions.



metaphysical view, one which I would characterize as monistic idealism. Specifically, people feel that there is an aspect or level of reality which is non-material and that this defines the essence or the foundation of all Existence. They felt that all things are interconnected, and that in their totality they constitute one harmonious whole. With this, people appreciate that there is sense and reason to all things and that reality is invested with great, heretofore unappreciated, meaningfulness. Significantly, some specific expressions reoccurred in the words of different individuals. Those which appeared most often are "everything is spirit," "everything is interconnected," "all is one," "this world is an illusion," "everything has meaning," "the different levels and aspects of reality exhibit the same essential structure." My own first-hand experiences with ayahuasca reveal similar patterns.

### Similarity with Western philosophies

These ideas are reminiscent of ideas put forth by many thinkers of both the East and the West. Of the latter, ones that especially come to mind are Plato, Plotinus, Spinoza and Hegel. Huxley referred to these by the umbrella term "perennial philosophy;" Huxley's book by this name (Huxley, 1944) is based on a comprehensive study of various religious and mystical traditions. Ideas of this kind are also encountered in contemporary reports based on the experiences of various individuals with psychedelics (not including ayahuasca); classical examples are Huxley's own reports based on experiences with mescaline (Huxley, 1959) and Watts' *The Joyous Cosmology* (Watts, 1962) which is based on experiences with LSD, mushrooms and mescaline. Interestingly, William James, while under the effect of another psychotropic substance, nitrous oxide, arrived at a similar idealistic world-view. By no means was this a simple matter for James—the philosophical ideas he conceived under the influence were reminiscent of the ideas of Hegel, a philosopher whose view James, as a philosopher, opposed (James, 1882). I should note that in no case were metaphysical ideas that would be associated with another philosophical line expressed. Given the theoretically possible space of philosophical ideas, this pattern is significant.

Similarities to classical Western philosophical ideas are not confined to metaphysics. They may also be related to epistemology, the philosophy of mind, and the theory of knowledge. Let me give just one example; this one too is taken from the interviews of independent drinkers. The person in question presented a whole metaphysical picture which he said came to him from ayahuasca. It was a radical idealistic view. When probing him with respect to the origin and possible veracity of this view, the man told me: "You are a professor so you think that you teach me, that you pass information to me. But this is not so. You only talk to me, and through this come up ideas and knowledge that are there, stored in my own mind. It is all there and, in effect, you teach me nothing." Plato's *Menon*, of which this person had never heard, strikingly entered my mind and I was baffled. I shall add that some ayahuasca drinkers who did have acquaintance with Western philosophy did, in fact, report to me that their visions were akin to Platonic idealism. In no case did anyone mention another philosopher to me. I,

too, thought of Plato several times in the course of my journey with ayahuasca. This was not a simple, straightforward matter. My professional work in cognitive psychology follows a strong anti-Platonistic line (Shanon, 1991). One of the most important effects ayahuasca has had on me is a serious entertainment of a Platonistic world-view. How the two tie together is a topic that I leave for another discussion. It is perhaps not irrelevant that Plato participated in the mysteries of Eleusis, where a psychotropic substance was probably consumed (Wasson, Ruck, & Hofmann; 1978).

### How are the ideas and insights produced?

Often, the experience is like that indicated above—the mind works fast and one's reflective and creative faculties are significantly enhanced. On other occasions, the person feels that information is communicated to him or her, usually in a kind of telepathic non-verbal manner. (Interestingly, this mode of communication and knowledge are featured centrally in the esoteric writings of Blake and Swedenborg). However, very often the ideas are directly related to perceptual, hallucinatory effects that the person experienced under the ayahuasca intoxication. Here I consider two patterns; both types were reported to me by many individuals, both I have experienced personally as well.

### The web of interconnectivity

The first has to do with the appreciation that all of reality is interconnected and that there is a force that makes it all exist and gives nourishment and sustenance to it all. Very often, this force is interpreted by people to be the Divine or the *anima mundi* and is characterized as being the fountain of everything—life, wisdom, health as well as intellectual and artistic creation. Personally, I have come to the ideas of this kind in conjunction with seeing what I called "the web"—translucent strings, like the threads of a spider web, that tie everything which is seen under the intoxication with open eyes. Afterwards, I have heard such an image mentioned many times by different individuals. The description of the visual effect was invariably the same and many persons used the identical phrase, "a web," to describe it. For instance, one of the independent informants told me that the most important teaching she has received from ayahuasca was the appreciation that the Divine does indeed exist. Asking her how she had arrived at this conclusion she answered by presenting a description of the translucent web that interlinks everything and sustains all of existence.

The case of the web may be characterized as literal, for in it the vision presents what to the person under the influence seems to actually be a certain facet of reality not perceived in the ordinary state of consciousness. By contrast, the second pattern is metaphorical. Functionally, the visions in question are similar to the images or visualization that often open parables in the Bible: An image will appear and the person under the intoxication will decipher it as a message. In the following example the message is personal, having to do with insights regarding the person's personal life, but similar patterns are



also encountered in conjunction with spiritual and philosophical ideas. Recounting her first ayahuasca sessions, one Brazilian middle class woman told me that she saw herself covered all around with a transparent plastic. Whenever she moved, the cover moved with her. She realized that in fact she is living her life separated from other people. Even though it seems that she is in contact with other people, in essence she is insulated and has no direct contact with anyone. The realization made this person change her attitude vis à vis human interpersonal relations. Another example is a vision of a building that was shabby and dilapidated. Apparently, the person having the vision understood, originally the building was well-designed and well constructed. Seeing this, the visioner realized that the building was him/herself and took it to mind that he/she had to make some basic change in his/her life. I use the compound masculine/feminine terms for indeed, I have heard of such a vision from two different persons—the first a Peruvian man of a low social class, the second a European woman visiting South America.

### Seeing and knowing

In closing, let me return to the visual aspects of the ayahuasca experience and comment on the more general relationship between seeing and knowing. In the traditional Amerindian context, an intimate affinity between the two is encountered. As reported by Langdon (Langdon, 1992), the Siona Indians consider "seeing" to be the major characteristic of high level *ayahuasqueros*. Further, in the practice of ayahuasca healing, the ayahuasca is said to enable the healer to see the inner parts of his patient and thus establish a diagnosis. Similarly, on the basis of experience with mescaline, Castaneda repeatedly says that what entheogenic plants do is make "one see" (Castaneda, 1971). Does the traditional healer "really" see what other people cannot see or is it only that his intuition and insight are enhanced? In interviews conducted with several traditional curanderos, I have tried to clarify this issue. Some have insisted that the brew literally enables them to see the inner parts of their patients' bodies. Yet empirically there was no way for me to objectively verify these claims. Perhaps the difference between these two possibilities is less than seems to be at first glance. Perhaps deep down, there comes a point where a clear cut distinction between perception and comprehension is impossible to make or even meaningless. It is not at all an accident that in many languages, as in English, the phrase "I see" is commonly used in the sense of "I understand." The relation between perception and knowledge is a fundamental issue in cognitive thought. A school of thought that has greatly minimized the distinction between the two is that of ecological psychology founded by James Gibson (Gibson, 1979); for a most readable introduction and overview, the reader is referred to Michaels and Carello (Michaels & Carello, 1981). In a book in progress, I discuss this topic further, both from a cognitive-psychological and from a philosophical perspective. •

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