

AYAHUASCA DRINKERS AMONG THE CHAMA INDIANS OF NORTHEAST PERU

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SOME TIME AGO I read an article describing the experience of consuming peyote, a cactus, with Indians of South Dakota. I could not help being reminded of the *ayahuasca* drinkers of northeast Peru. I lived for seven years traveling and trading in the Upper Amazon region and often heard stories about the effect of the drug. Once on a long canoe trip down the river my Indian companion had chanted the song of the "Goddess of Ayahuasca." *Ayahuasca*, a Quechua word meaning vine of death, is the collective name for various climbing tropical lianas* and also designates the tea prepared from the leaves of the vine, either by itself or in combination with other leaves.

Indians and low-class mestizos alike visit the *ayahuasquero* or witchdoctor when they are ailing, or think they need a general check-up, or want to make an important decision, or simply because they feel like it. Among the scattered halfcastes and natives of the swamps and rain-forests of the Ucayali region the *ayahuasca* cult plays a significant role in their religious medical practices and provides them with a good deal of entertainment.

Repeatedly I heard how in a vision induced by drinking the tea prepared from the liana the patient had perceived the specific plant needed for his cure, had later searched and found it in the jungle and had subsequently recovered. To the enigmatic mind of the Indian, *ayahuasca* opens the gate to the healing properties of the forces of nature at whose mercy he lives. A recurrent theme, whenever the natives refer to the results of the drug, is the vision of the procession of plants, with garlic, the "king" of the good plants, leading the way. Garlic, tobacco, quinine, and *ojé*,† (a tree

*Various species of *Banisteriopsis*, especially *B. Caapi*.

†*Ficus helmiathogoga*

latex now processed in Iquitos and exported to a pharmaceutical firm in New York for use in a remedy against hookworm), are at the head of a long line of friendly, elf-like plants which in *ayahuasca* visions bow to man, offering their services.

The strange aspect of the veneration of garlic is that it does not even grow in the jungle. Garlic and dogs are the main products of individual barter between Quechua highland Indians and those people with which they apparently have no ethnic and hardly any linguistic bonds. The lowland Indians live under the jagged mountain-ranges of the eastern Andes. Perspiring couples, dressed in heavy woolen homespun garments, descend from their cold heights into the dark hot valleys which they fear, carrying loads of garlic on their backs and driving herds of small thin dogs before them to exchange for ginger roots and other medicinal plants of the forest. Dogs are always in demand for hunting because they fall prey so easily to ant-eaters, panthers and snakes. And garlic, in the common belief of the people, helps protect them from the most frequent plagues of the jungle-dweller, the amoebas, parasites and parasitic worms. Garlic also keeps poisonous snakes away, when the juice is rubbed on feet and legs; and a section of a clove of garlic when kept in the pocket is believed to be potent enough to protect the bearer against a "light" love-charm. Such a charm, referred to as *brebaje*, is prepared with relative ease by adding a trace of the female cyclic affliction to an innocent refreshment. A more elaborate charm used by the male, called *pusanga*, is an expensive oil obtained from a certain part of a porpoise, by a qualified individual observing strict rules of procedure, fasting, and solitude. A few drops of this essence applied to the man's hands before dancing are said to have an automatic effect on the desired partner. Aside from these there are many other more or less elaborate charms also referred to as *pusanga*.

The half-civilized Chama Indians, sturdy fellows, who today specialize in drawing mahogany and cedar logs for the sawmills in Iquitos, undergo a "purge" of *ayahuasca* before they enter the flooded areas of forest to float out the logs and assemble them into tremendous rafts. For a cure of that nature they prepare themselves by a prolonged diet, avoiding meat, salt, alcohol, and sugar.

Aside from the main use of the drug for curing or keeping the consumer in good general condition *ayahuasca* will, according to its users, induce clairvoyance and may, for example, solve a theft or prophesy the success or failure of a given enterprise. A man might be planning a trip to a certain river where he knows of a good place to tap rubber, but to be sure of good results he will consult *ayahuasca* first. After that, more than likely he will

abandon the enterprise altogether and set off in another direction to pan gold, hunt peccary, or do something else.

The drug also provides escape and entertainment, as a cerebral way of projecting free, custom-made, technicolor movies to all the devotees of the herb, wherever they establish their temporary homes in the great wastes of shifting riverbanks, blindingly hot beaches, islands, and hidden clearings of the Upper Amazon.

Squatting on their heels on the high riverbanks at dusk, to escape the view of the jungle-wall towering above their huts, they rest their eyes on the great expanse of water. Or they enjoy the breeze and converse in low tones at high noon lying under the palm-leaf roofs shading their rafts. The balsa rafts seem nailed to the middle of the stream which creeps tediously past the far-away shorelines, imperceptibly leaving behind turn after turn.

In these unhurried hours and days I arrived at an insight into the natives' fantastic beliefs and images, the richness of which is equalled only by the growth of the surrounding vegetation. Their superstitions, ideas and images freely cross and recross the borderline of reality in strangely patterned ways. Their stories have one thing in common: man, plant, and animal are one, forever woven into an inextricable pattern of cause and effect. Later I found that *ayahuasca* visions are the fabrics that illustrate endless combinations of this pattern. Man, plant, and animal also passively undergo the irradiations of each other — irradiations of powers that to us are mostly non-existent. Somehow, sometimes, they even acquire each other's characteristics.

Once, drifting in a canoe, the Campa Indian with me disturbed the silence by imitating the voice of the cotomono, a copper-colored monkey. A cotomono from the shore answered him. A third joined in. After a while the whole shoreline seemed to come alive with cotomonos. The natives use this ability to imitate voices to such a degree that hunting takes on the character of treacherous assassination.

Though hardly in the way of an equivalent, the animal world "puts out" a bird that I heard one night, on the Pachitea river. It filled the darkness with a descending scale of glass-clear notes. Quite likely it is a beautiful scale, but nevertheless it resembles the hysterical laughter of an insane woman. It shocked me; I felt upset, mocked, laughed at.

The transformation of the *isula* is a good example of the fusing of the zoological and the botanical worlds. A hateful inch-long ant, whose bite is very painful and causes fever, the *isula* dies upright, when its time comes, clinging to a tree, and out of its

decaying body grows the indispensable vine used in the construction of huts, known as "támishe."

Although man is exposed to the powers of animals, plants and fellowmen, he can, through knowledge, cunning and fasting, counteract their powers or even turn them to his use. This belief is at the base of a vast body of hunting and fishing charms which the Chamas call *piri-piri*. A Chama who wants to obtain a *piri-piri* to catch a huge lake-fish called *paiche*, which provides his main staple food, must, before breakfast, on an empty stomach, harpoon a porpoise and deposit it on the black humus beneath the trees. From then on he must abstain from fat, salt, and everything sweet, and live without seeing another soul, till through the decayed body of the porpoise sprout a variety of tender plants. Out of these he prepares a small quantity of extract. A few drops of it on his body will irresistibly "call" the *paiche* into the reach of his harpoon.

Everything "calls" in the jungle. Once a Campa Indian in my boat, when we were drifting far from the shore, was "called" by *ayahuasca*, followed the "call," and later emerged from the forest with a sampling of the fairly rare liana that today is cultivated by the *ayahuasquero* in secret spots. I myself certainly did not hear the call.

If this jungle life in its irrational mutual dependency forms a picture of general confusion, *ayahuasca* is the magic mirror that reflects this confusion as something beautiful and attractive. For whomever I listened to, all manifested the enjoyment of a wondrous spectacle that was pleasing to the senses. If fearsome visions occurred, they said that the *ayahuasquero* could easily dispel them by shaking a dry twig near the ear of the affected drinker, or by blowing the smoke of a cigarette on the crown of his head. The aesthetic climax of the spectacle was, they claimed, the vision of the goddess with concealed eyes (*la diosa con los ojos vendados*), who dwelt inside the twining tropical vine.

Many times I listened to these tales, but it never crossed my mind to try the liana myself. It belonged definitely to the low-class Indian lore, to something sordid, outside of the law, something publicly frowned upon like the binding-up of the heads that the Chamas practice on their babies, or like burying one twin alive as they also do, or so many other equally fantastic or ghastly things.

In 1949 I had my headquarters in a white-washed brick house in Pucallpa overlooking a wide curve of the Ucayali. Pucallpa at that time was a village of about 200 homes, a Catholic church, an American Protestant mission, a Masonic temple and two primitive hotels. The place had gained some importance by being at the end

of the only road, precariously connecting Lima and the Pacific with a navigable river of the Amazon system. It had also an airport which could be used when the ground was dry. After the war and the falling of prices for rubber, skins and rotenone, the importance of the road decreased, and Pucallpa fell back to the stagnation of a Peruvian jungle settlement.

At that time I realized that my days in the jungle were coming to an end and in spite of being somewhat sceptical about the possible effects of the drug, decided to try it.

I drank the bitter salty extract of the vine three times. It seemed too much trouble to look for a venerated great *ayahuasquero* like Juan Inuma, who lived up the river near Masisea. There were a number of less widely-esteemed fellows in Pucallpa, such as Nolorbe, who was recommended to me as the most reliable of the witchdoctors in the village. His hut was the last upstream in the long row of buildings above the steep shore of Pucallpa. It was there that I found myself sitting on an empty gasoline crate one night, while other people squatted on the floor. I drank the required dose — about a quart — and nothing happened. The only noticeable effect was an increased auditory sensitivity, which is the reason why the drug is consumed in secluded places at night. A neighborhood rooster crowed recklessly which upset me considerably for it seemed to happen right in my head. The people in the hut were disturbed also for they sighed and shifted their positions uneasily. Nolorbe blamed the ineffectiveness of the drug on the fact that it had not been freshly prepared.

Another evening the guide who carried my blanket led me to a hut far outside the limits of the village. The hut, a typical structure of a floor on stilts without walls, covered by a thatched roof, belonged to Saldaña, a *mestizo* I did not particularly like, who had many patients in the village. I lay down on the raised floor of beaten palmbark overlooking the clearing, and Saldaña handed me a bottle of *ayahuasca*. I started to drink and heard him singing behind a partition where he was tending his patients. I listened carefully to the startling song that is always sung in Quechua, the language of the highland Indians which only old people in the Ucayali region speak. The song starts with a shrill musical question and continues with a series of answers, intermixed with hissing sounds and syncopated with guttural noises produced by the tongue against the palate. I drank the whole dose Saldaña had prepared for me and felt slightly dizzy and nauseated. After a while I climbed down from the raised floor, using the ladder, made as usual by hacking footholes into an upright log. The clearing and surrounding jungle looked as though covered with white ashes in the strong

moonlight. From the hut behind me I heard the sound of voices speaking monotonously. I heard Saldaña intermittently singing the song or administering his cures.

One of the procedures used to relieve a pain is actually to suck the pain out of the hurting member. When this has been repeated often enough, the pain is supposed to be located in the doctor's mouth and removed from there by spitting. Again my stimulated hearing reported those awful noises so intensely that at times they were hard to endure.

The next day Saldaña attributed this failure to the fact that I had a slight cold. I was more sceptical than ever. After all, if unlike those people I was not able to hear the call of the plant or to walk noiselessly through the jungle, maybe I lacked also the required acuteness of senses to meet the iridescent goddess.

I am glad that I went a third time. I made another appointment with Nolorbe for a Saturday night. I walked out to his place at the edge of the forest at about 10 P.M. I realized that his one-room house that stood in darkness and silence was crowded and waited outside till he emerged. I told him that I would rather not join the crowd and he obligingly showed me a good-sized canoe pulled up for repairs and resting about twenty feet from the cane wall of his shack towards the edge of the jungle.

I wrapped myself in a blanket and lay down comfortably, my shoulders against the cedar walls of the dugout, my head resting on the slanting stern. I felt relaxed and full of expectation. Nolorbe had appeared eager and confident. A small, barefooted Indian, with something queer and slightly funny about his face, he showed a nervousness which did not go with his sturdy native build. He seemed to be never quite present, as if continuously distracted by too frequent encounters with his vegetable gods and devils. His eyes were not steady but pulled in different directions. While somewhat fearful, there was something very happy about this man, as if a hidden gaiety were buried under his worried features. He believed himself smart and powerful, he lived a glorious life, even if sometimes he seemed to go to pieces in his effort to walk back and forth professionally between two equally puzzling worlds. I remembered seeing him once in the *Comisaría* in conflict with one of them, accused again of leading a disorderly life and practicing quackery. He was standing in his formerly green trousers, before a wooden table and the Peruvian flag, answering the rude Guardia Civil with a humble smile, his eyes going apologetically in all directions.

He soon appeared with a gourdful of liquid he had carefully prepared by stewing for hours the leaves of the vine with those of

another plant, whose name possibly was his secret. He squatted at the canoe and whispered, his eyes going sideways: "Gringo, today you will experience the real thing, I will serve you well, we will have the true intoxication, you will be satisfied, wait and see" . . . And he left me alone. After a while a girl approached me from the hut and asked for a cigarette. She lighted it, inhaled, and for a moment I saw her wide face surrounded by hard black hair; then she walked noiselessly back into the hut. A *tu-ayo* bird began to call repeatedly, high above my face. The whistling and melodious sound at the end of his call seemed to touch me like a whiplash. A truck loaded with cedarboards left the village, and on the distant highway accelerated madly and shifted gears. By that time I knew the drug was working in me, felt fine and heard Nolorbe whispering near my ear again: "Do you want more? Shall I give you more? Do you want to see the goddess well?" And again I drank the full gourd of cool, bitter liquid. I cannot say how often Nolorbe was present, whispering and drinking with me, singing the song near my ear and far away, treating his patients and making those awful primitive noises that I despised. There was another sound that upset me more than anything, like something round falling into a deep well, a mysterious, slippery and indecent sound. (Much later I found out that it was produced by the normally innocuous action of Nolorbe ladling water out of an old oil barrel by means of a small gourd.) I yawned through what seemed to be an interminable night, till the muscles of my face were strained; sometimes I yawned so hard that it seemed to me as loud as the roaring of the sea on a rocky coast. Things got so gay, absorbing and beautiful, that I had to laugh foolishly. The laughter came out of my insides of its own accord and shook me absurdly. At the same time I cried, and the tears that were running down my face were annoying, but they kept running madly, and no matter how often I wiped my cheeks, I could not dry them.

The first visual experience was like fireworks. Then a continuously creating power produced a wealth of simple and elaborate flat patterns in color. There were patterns that consisted of twining repeats, and others geometrically organized with rectangles or squares that were like Maya designs or those decorations which the Chamas paint on their thin, ringing pottery.

The visions were in constant flux. First intermittently, then successively, the flat patterns gave way to deep-brown, purple or green depths, like dimly lighted caves in which the walls were too far away to be perceived. At times snake-like stems of plants were growing profusely in the depths, at others these were covered with arrangements of myriads of lights that like dewdrops or gems

adorned them. Now and then brilliant light illuminated the scene as though by photographic flash, showing wide landscapes with trees placed at regular intervals or just empty plains. A big ship with many flags appeared in one of these flashes, a merry-go-round with people dressed in highly colored garments in another. The song of Nolorbe in the background seemed to physically touch a brain center, and each of his hissing guttural syncopations hurt and started new centers of hallucinations which kept on moving and changing to the rhythm of his chant. At a certain point I felt, helplessly, that Nolorbe and his song could do anything with me. There was one note in his song, that came back again and again, which made me slide deeper, whenever it appeared, deeper and deeper into a place where I might lose consciousness. If, to reassure myself, I opened my eyes, I saw the dark wall of the jungle covered with jewels as if a net of lights had been thrown over it. Upon closing my eyes again, I could renew the procession of slick, well-lighted images.

There were two very definite attractions; I enjoyed the unreality of a created world. The images were not casual, accidental or imperfect, but fully organized to the last detail of highly complex, consistent, yet forever changing designs. They were harmonized in color and had a slick, sensuous, polished finish. The other attraction of which I was very conscious at the time was an inexplicable sensation of intimacy with the visions. They were mine and concerned only me. I remembered an Indian telling me that whenever he drank *ayahuasca*, he had such beautiful visions that he used to put his hands over his eyes for fear somebody might steal them. I felt the same way.

The color scheme became a harmony of dark browns and greens. Naked dancers appeared turning slowly in spiral movements. Spots of brassy lights played on their bodies which gave them the texture of polished stones. Their faces were inclined and hidden in deep shadows. Their coming into existence in the center of the vision coincided with the rhythm of Nolorbe's song, and they advanced forward and to the sides, turning slowly. I longed to see their faces. At last the whole field of vision was taken up by a single dancer with inclined face covered by a raised arm. As my desire to see the face became unendurable, it appeared suddenly in full close-up with closed eyes. I know that when the extraordinary face opened them, I experienced a satisfaction of a kind I had never known. It was the visual solution of a personal riddle.

I got up and walked away without disturbing Nolorbe. When I arrived home I was still subject to uncontrollable fits of yawning and laughter. I sat down before my house. I remember that a drop

of dew fell from the tin roof, and its impact was so noisy that it made me shudder. I looked at my watch and realized it was not yet midnight. The next day and for quite some time I felt unusually well.

Three years later, in a letter from Pucallpa, I heard that Nolorbe had been accused of "bewitching a man into insanity" and had been jailed in Iquitos.

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