

## Drinking the Sacred Jungle Juice: **Three Ayahuasca Book Reviews**

By: David Jay Brown, M.A.

### **Singing to the Plants: A Guide to Mestizo Shamanism in the Upper Amazon**

By Stephan V. Beyer

University of New Mexico Press, 2009

532 pages, paperback, illustrated, \$29.95

[www.singingtotheplants.com](http://www.singingtotheplants.com)

### **Ayahuasca in My Blood: 25 Years of Medicine Dreaming**

By Peter Gorman

Gorman Bench Press, 2010

252 pages, illustrated, softbound, \$25

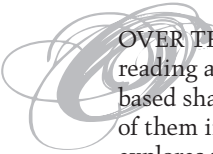
[www.pgorman.com](http://www.pgorman.com)

### **Fishers of Men: The Gospel of an Ayahuasca Vision Quest**

By Adam Elenbaas

Jeremy P. Tarcher/Penguin, New York, 2010

288 pages, hardbound, \$24.96



OVER THE PAST FEW MONTHS, I've been reading a series of books about ayahuasca-based shamanism and will be reviewing three of them in this Bulletin. Each of these books explores this fascinating phenomenon from a different angle, and each of them offers a unique perspective on the magical landscape associated with ayahuasca, a powerful psychoactive brew made from several plants found in the Amazon. The brew is prepared from the *Banisteriopsis caapi* vine, which contain harmala alkaloids, and is usually mixed with the leaves of a dimethyltryptamine (DMT)-containing species of shrubs from the *Psychotria* genus. The resulting brew contains the alkaloid DMT, which is a strong psychedelic, and MAO-inhibiting harmala alkaloids, which are essential for making the DMT orally active.

Stephan Beyer's *Singing to the Plants* is the most thoroughly and systematically researched of the books I recently read on this subject, and although it's the most scientifically objective of the three books, like the other two, it also captures some of the author's personal impressions, experiences, and insights. However, unlike the other two books, which are more personal stories, Beyer's thoroughly explored analysis of ayahuasca-based shamanism is encyclopedic in scope, and it serves as an academic reference book that carefully catalogs the important anthropological aspects of the traditional and culturally-blended ayahuasca-based healing ceremonies in the Upper Amazon. According to Bonnie Glass-Coffin, Ph.D., *Singing to the Plants* will "be recognized as the definitive work on this topic."

In Beyer's comprehensive volume he sees the ayahuasca healing ceremonies as primarily

being a theatrical art form, a type of performance that combines costumes, props, music, conjuring, poetry, movement, plots, suspense, stagecraft, dialogue, and sleight-of-hand stage magic. "The ceremony," Beyer writes, "like other compositions in art, dance, and music, does not contribute a single message sent intact to receivers; it relies instead on the spectators to make meaning of the performance."

Like all psychedelics, ayahuasca has a tendency to increase both suggestibility, as well as a sense of enhanced meaning, and when this experience is combined with the proper type of ceremony, or guidance by an experienced shaman, it is often reported to help the body heal itself from a variety of difficult-to-treat illnesses. The body's innate ability to heal itself from illness is often brushed aside in medical research trials as "merely" the placebo effect. However, with ayahuasca-based shamanism the body's innate healing ability takes center stage, where it seems to become magnified, and there are numerous stories of people who have had both long-standing medical illnesses suddenly and miraculously vanish, or vastly improve, after an ayahuasca healing ceremony.

Peter Gorman's 25-year personal journey with ayahuasca, which is chronicled in his book, *Ayahuasca in My Blood*, reads like a page-turning, action-adventure story, and his exquisitely described experiences with the sacred jungle juice certainly stretched the boundaries of what I thought was possible into paranormal realms. It's hard for someone raised in the West, with a materialistic mindset, to read Gorman's book and not shake one's head in disbelief, wondering, "how could this really happen?" He describes absolutely incredible



encounters with nonhuman spirit entities and transcorporeal shamans, psychic experiences with remote viewing and telepathy, contact with the dead, and striking synchronicities that confirm his ayahuasca visions.

The wise and generous shamans that Gorman worked with, the spiritual allies that he gained, and the plant teachers that challenged and educated him are all described in fascinating detail, intimately woven into his personal story about the many years that he's spent living in the Amazon. Gorman, who was my editor at *High Times* magazine years ago, was one of the first Westerners to start spending time in the Amazon. As Dennis McKenna said, "Long before ayahuasca tourism became a pastime for rich gringos, Peter Gorman was knocking around Iquitos and the Amazon... This is the intensely personal story of an old-school jungle rat for whom ayahuasca is not just a hobby, but a lifelong quest."

Like Gorman's book, Adam Elenbaas' *Fishers of Men* is also a personal journey and a spiritual quest. This inspiring book—which engages the heart and challenges the mind—alternates perspectives between Elenbaas' childhood in Minnesota, where he grew up as the rebellious and hedonistic son of a Methodist minister, and the jungles of Peru, where he purges the "toxic waste" from his troubled youth during shaman-guided ayahuasca sessions. Elenbaas' eloquently-crafted passages that describe his ayahuasca journeys, and his emotionally-gripping and unusually honest testimony, makes for a very unique coming-of-age story. Along with Beyer and Gorman's books, I highly recommend Elenbaas' work to anyone interested in learning more about ayahuasca.

All three authors discuss the important role that *icaros* (the songs that are sung by the shamans during an ayahuasca healing ceremony to invoke particular plant spirits) play, and I read repeatedly about the vital roles of purging, blowing tobacco smoke, and sucking transcorporeal phlegm and evil "magic darts" out of ill patients. I also came across a lot about of discussion about *brujos*, people who learn a little about ayahuasca-based shamanism, and then use that powerful knowledge for selfish reasons or personal gain. Apparently, there are long-standing rivalries in the Upper Amazon between these brujos and the more healing-focused shamans, where ferocious dark energies and nefarious magic darts" are reportedly exchanged in a kind of psychic warfare, which almost sounds like the witches battling it out in *Bed Knobs and Broomsticks*.

Thus the three books explore both the light and dark sides of ayahuasca-based shamanism. Like any form of power or technology, ayahuasca, it appears, can be used to both heal and harm. Whether it opens up a portal into other dimensions, where interspecies or spirit communication become possible, or whether it merely amplifies the body's own ability to heal or harm itself through mysterious means, almost everyone who tries it agrees – ayahuasca is pretty powerful stuff. So when ayahuasca-based sessions are motivated by jealousy, revenge, or less than noble human emotions, the result, it seems, can be quite dangerous. But with the proper mental set, and the right ceremonial setting, it appears that an ayahuasca experience can also be a doorway into amazing new worlds that offers profound life-changing insights, miraculous healings, and lasting spiritual fulfillment. •



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