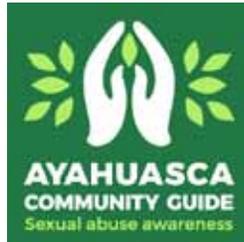


Ayahuasca Community Guide for the Awareness of Sexual Abuse

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MANY INDIVIDUALS PARTICIPATE IN AYAHUASCA ceremonies for healing purposes, sometimes specifically to heal trauma caused by sexual abuse. Considering this, it is especially disturbing to discover that sexual abuse is also quite prevalent in ayahuasca and shamanic healing contexts. Several cases, some quite high profile, have come to light in recent years spanning different kinds of abuse across diverse ayahuasca ceremonial contexts. Yet, despite sexual abuse and harassment being prevalent within ayahuasca circles, many participants seeking ayahuasca healing are still unaware of the problem and can unknowingly end up in a vulnerable situation. Indeed, one of the first obstacles we face in attempting to address sexual abuse in the ayahuasca community is the widespread disbelief that sexual abuse is indeed a problem. The Chacruna Institute for Psychedelic Plant Medicines believes that the more people learn about past and potential sexual abuse, the greater the chances to combat it. Sexual assault is *always the fault of the perpetrator*, and it is the responsibility of all individuals within the community to come forward and speak about this. While we have no control over the perpetrators of these acts, we hope that the experiences of others can be useful in raising awareness about the typical contexts in which past abuse has occurred.

Motivated by a desire to raise awareness and to help safeguard individuals and groups in ayahuasca healing contexts, Chacruna produced the Ayahuasca Community Guide for the Awareness of Sexual Abuse, (chacruna.net/community/ayahuasca-community-guide-for-the-awareness-of-sexual-abuse) an initiative of Chacruna's Ayahuasca Community Committee (chacruna.net/community). We chose to craft the guidelines to focus on women, since it is mostly female participants being abused by male shamans that comprise the bulk of sexual abuse occurrences. Yet, our hope is that they are of value to all. Attempting to cover diverse social and cultural settings where ayahuasca healing takes place, the guidelines have been created through a collaborative process with many experienced individuals in a wide range of ayahuasca settings across different cultural contexts and continents. This shared process has included indigenous as well as Western victims and survivors of abuse, ayahuasca healers and ceremonial facilitators, and anthropologists who, like ourselves, have conducted long term fieldwork in lowland South America and have longstanding experience with ayahuasca communities. We also have tried to make these guidelines relevant across the spectrum of potential abuse that can occur in ayahuasca settings, including verbal persuasion, invasive touching, "consensual" sex between healer and participant, and rape.

In forming the guidelines, we began by asking, "why is sexual abuse so prevalent in ayahuasca circles?" Apart from acknowledging that sexual abuse is an abuse of power, which occurs broadly across diverse contexts in diverse societies, we were interested

in better understanding what elements or conditions can specifically be linked to ayahuasca healing contexts. One issue is the undue romanticism that can surround expectations about ayahuasca and *ayahuasqueros*, and the assumed position of trust a healer or ceremonial facilitator inhabits in the imagination of participants. When entering into ayahuasca healing circles, one may assume and expect to be entering a safe space. One may assume or expect to be able to trust the people calling themselves healers, “shamans,” leaders, and facilitators of this space. The guidelines hope to shed light on the context of typical ayahuasca scenarios and what some of the associated assumptions and expectations surrounding these might be. For instance, the guidelines hope to demystify the position of the ayahuasca healer, as well as to draw attention to multicultural issues within ayahuasca community contexts that are not immediately understood or applicable outside of such settings. The guidelines present a series of cultural differences that have typically created confusion, miscommunication, and conflict in ayahuasca healing settings. It is important to note that sexual abuse of women in the ayahuasca community occurs across and within cultures, between indigenous healers and participants, and between Western healers and participants. Moreover, research and experience indicate that the potential for abuse is further exacerbated by cultural differences in the current context of the increasing globalization of ayahuasca, whereby many Western people now partake in ayahuasca ceremonies in South American contexts, or whereby South American healers travel to the West. A main aim of our guidelines is to empower women in these culturally unfamiliar contexts where ayahuasca ceremonies often take place.

Mutual cross-cultural misunderstandings and misconceptions between healers and participants create confusion at least and can be brutally manipulated at worst. Many Western people hold highly romanticized views of shamans and ceremonial leaders, imagining them to be like saints or spiritual gurus. Within their native communities, however, anthropologists have learned that *ayahuasqueros* are viewed as normal men with varying degrees of healing talents who do not necessarily occupy esteemed community positions. Yet, many *ayahuasqueros* have learnt to take advantage of romanticized notions that non-indigenous people have of them as healers, and might use this role to manipulate others for their own personal sexual interests. This often occurs in the context of individual healings called *sopladas* or *limpiezas*, where women who are naïve about what constitutes usual levels of touching and nudity are especially vulnerable to abuse. It appears to be common for women to be invited by ayahuasca healers for “special” healing experiences, and then be manipulated or forced into sexual acts. The guidelines explain that nudity is not typical and shamans do not

customarily require their patients to remove undergarments for the purposes of healing. Yet, in a new environment, without understanding basic ground rules, someone can be unsure of what is considered necessary or not, and may find that a boundary soon slips out of their control. Our hope is that, with knowledge of the guidelines beforehand, people can be aware of common manipulative techniques that sexual abuse perpetrators might employ.

A complex and important issue that is raised by the Charuna guidelines in addressing sexual misconduct in ayahuasca circles is the issue of mutual consent. Research and experience suggest that many incidents of abuse occur in contexts that can be spoken of in precarious “consensual” terms. Consent lets

someone know that sex is wanted; this needs to happen in a mutually intelligible language, where “consent” means the same thing to all the individuals involved. While at the moment of the alleged “consent,” all things might seem equal, they often are not. As in any healer-patient dynamic, the healer is in a position of power and responsibility, creating an

imbalance between the parties. Many healers have manipulated vulnerable women into having sex with them through taking advantage of these uneven power dynamics. Individuals often have no way of knowing that they are being manipulated or influenced by factors outside of their control. The presence of ayahuasca in these encounters raises the question of whether a person can truly consent to sexual relations if they are under the influence of a psychedelic substance. Furthermore, according to shamanic practice, it is possible for an *ayahuasquero* to influence a woman through shamanic techniques into feeling sexually attracted to him.

Other psychoactive substances have also been used in the wider ceremonial context to decapacitate women in order to confuse and sexually abuse them. It is also common for healers to suggest that having sex with them is a form of healing, or a way to gain spiritual power, and to also deceive women by stating that these relations are morally acceptable to their wives or partners. They might also be given a special position in the ceremonial space to make them feel special or gifted, encouraging them to continue to engage in sexual relations with a ceremonial leader. Women are often confused and ashamed following these incidents of abuse and feel unable to speak up. Recognizing that we are limited in our ability to influence the shamans, religious leaders and other perpetrators of abuse in ayahuasca contexts with whom the accountability lies, the guidelines are aimed at empowering by raising awareness of common contexts in which seduction and abuse can happen so that individuals have knowledge of this and can make informed decisions.

Research also shows that some women stand by their decisions of mutual consensual sex with shamans or their assistants

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and have no regrets. Some individuals are attracted to the possibility of having sex with a shaman or ceremonial leader, and may pursue sexual relations with them. Of course, it is also possible that loving and sexual relationships can be established between ceremonial facilitators and participants in ayahuasca circles. However, as with doctors and patients, it is widely agreed that this is a transgression in the healing context.

The importance of integration is also emphasized in ayahuasca circles, after allowing time for the effects of the medicine to wear off with its ensuing sense of empowerment and after waiting to “come back down to earth” so that a woman can apply clear judgement. It is the healer or facilitator’s responsibility to resist entering into relationships with ceremonial participants within the healing space and context.

There is no common rule of how long afterward parties should wait outside the healing context if they are considering initiating a relationship. Indeed, this topic generates heated arguments in the ayahuasca community. Chacruna’s purpose with the guidelines is to raise awareness about the complexities of “consensual” sex with an ayahuasca healer so that women can be informed and thus empowered by this knowledge to make their own choices. Further discussion is needed across the ayahuasca community and wider psychedelic circles to better establish where the boundaries might lie between consensual and non-consensual sexual relations, a conversation that should be ongoing.

Finally, it is important to emphasize that there are many male healers and ceremonial facilitators working with ayahuasca with great integrity who are outraged by sexual abuse in ayahuasca settings. We hope that, in addition to helping to safeguard women, the guidelines will help to inspire constructive dialogue around sexual misconduct and its elimination. We do not intend to alienate men from this conversation; indeed, they form part of our committee. In fact, we believe it is crucial to our communal efforts toward healing that this conversation extends across gender as well as cultural boundaries. Sexual abuse, of course, affects people well beyond ayahuasca healing contexts. It is a global epidemic in contemporary society. As a community interested in and practicing healing, we are well positioned to address this grave problem within and, perhaps, even beyond, our community. 🌱

RESOURCES

Council for the Protection of Sacred Plants chacruna.net/council-for-the-protection-of-sacred-plants

Legal resources for victims of sexual abuse, a project of the Council for the Protection of Sacred Plants chacruna.net/community/ayahuasca-community-guide-for-the-awareness-of-sexual-abuse

Peyote Files, an educational project to raise awareness for conservation issues around peyote vimeo.com/301667934

Psychedelic-Assisted Therapy Music Forum chacruna.net/psychedelic-therapy-music-forum

Queering Psychedelics Conference, June 1-2, 2019, San Francisco, CA. chacruna.net/queering-psychedelics

Retreat for health care professionals in Costa Rica soltara.co/healthcare-practitioner-retreat

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