

An Interview with Jeremy Narby, Ph.D. by David Jay Brown

## Decoding the **Cosmic Serpent**



Jeremy Narby  
jnarby@bluewin.ch

Anthropologist Jeremy Narby, Ph.D. is the author of *The Cosmic Serpent*, *Intelligence in Nature*, and is the coeditor of *Shamans Through Time*. He received his doctorate in anthropology from Stanford University, and spent several years living with the Ashaninca in the Peruvian Amazon, cataloging indigenous uses of rainforest resources to help combat ecological destruction. Narby sponsored an expedition to the rainforest for biologists and other scientists to examine indigenous knowledge systems, and the utility of (the hallucinogenic jungle brew) ayahuasca in gaining knowledge. Narby has said that the information that shamans access “has a stunning correspondence with molecular biology,” and that one might be able to gain biomolecular information in ayahuasca visions. Since 1989, Narby has been working as the Amazonian projects director for the Swiss NGO, Nouvelle Planète. To follow is an excerpt from a recent interview that I did with Jeremy; the complete interview will appear in my forthcoming book, *Renaissance of the Mind*. –DJB

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David: *What type of relationship do you see between psychedelics and ecology, and do you see psychedelics playing a role to help increase ecological awareness?*

Jeremy: In the spirit of dialogue, I would quibble with the question a little bit, because I think that in as much as psychedelics have a relation with ecology, it's via people. So people are lacking in the question. Then, I think that psychedelics have different effects on different people. So the short answer to your question is that it depends, and if you could make your question more precise, I could advance with it. I don't just think that psychedelics--as a group of substances--are any sort of instant ecology-awareness pills.

David: *Perhaps you could talk a little about the relationship between ayahuasca use in the Amazon and how this effects the ecological relationships there?*

Jeremy: Okay, that's getting a bit more precise. But, once again, I think that by asking the question that way it does omit who is taking the ayahuasca, what ayahuasca it is, and where they are taking it. I think that the ayahuasca experience is also a function of who's doing it, where they're doing it, and how they're doing it--beyond set and setting, which is just obvious. So, in other words, who are we talking about? For example, the indigenous people of the Amazon and what we know about them historically? Or how ayahuasca has impacted on their eco-cosmologies? That could be a subject of a whole book, but it's certainly a precise question. You want me to talk about that precise question?

David: *Yes, and maybe you could also talk a bit about the worldwide ecology movement, and whether you think that's in any way related to people who have used psychedelics?*



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*A lot of people think that psychedelic experiences have been an important part of the inspiration for the ecology movement.*

Jeremy: Yes, it's true that one runs into quite a few people in the broad ecology movement who say that their engagement has been souped up by ayahuasca, and I guess I would include myself in that bunch.

David: *So maybe you could also address a little bit about the use of ayahuasca by indigenous people in the Amazon, and how that affected their relationship with their environment?*

Jeremy: I think the way that they look at it is like this. There is a level of reality that is parallel to our own, but that we don't see with our, let's say, "normal eyes," but in certain states of mind you can see it. Ayahuasca is known by the people who use it to make the invisible visible, and first and foremost you take ayahuasca to see, and to see what you normally don't see. So, in their view, one could say that ayahuasca is an important tool for knowing the world, as microscopes have been for biologists. It's an absolutely central tool in approaching an otherwise invisible level of nature.

So, in their view, ayahuasca--but also other plant teachers like tobacco--have enabled them to have an ongoing conversation with the powers in nature, entities or essences corresponding to the different species. For them, ayahuasca is the telephone, but the person on the other end is the whole assembly of nature. So what's important is not the telephone; it's the conversation that you have with the other species. It would seem that these indigenous societies have been dialoguing--at least in the visions of their shamans--with the essences of plants, animals, and ecosystems for millennia. And they view nature not as an object—but as a subject, or a series of subjects, with whom you negotiate if you want game and health.

So yes, ayahuasca is central to the eco-cosmology of many indigenous Amazonian peoples. It is that which enables communication, but that doesn't mean that it needs to be worshipped. Once again, the importance of the conversation, in their view, is because nature really is a bunch of subjectivities, and it really is important to communicate with them, because we're

on the same planet as them. So, how the human community negotiates its relation with other species is precisely what shamans negotiate traditionally in their visions attained using these plants. That's why these plants are central to their eco-cosmology.

But I guess the reason why I object to the general nature of the question about psychedelics and ecology is that it's like the question about psychedelics and creativity. If only it sufficed to take psychedelics and everybody could play the guitar like Jimi Hendrix--but it doesn't happen that way. Some people have taken psychedelics and have done terrible things. Likewise, there are a lot of people in the ayahuasca movement, and they may talk about this and that, but some of them lead pretty un-ecological lifestyles, it seems to me. Unfortunately, there are Westerners that are demonstrating that it's possible to turn ayahuasca into a kind of a drug, really. So if only everyone who was guzzling ayahuasca became an ecological activist, at least it would be easy to answer the question.

David: *I was just wondering whether you've seen a pattern of any kind. It seems to me like psychedelics, in general, are basically boundary-dissolving, nonspecific brain amplifiers.*

Jeremy: Exactly. So if somebody's got an ecological sensitivity, then it will amplify it. But if they're power-hungry, then it will amplify that too. So depicting ayahuasca as this magical thing that draws people to understand nature better, and then to become healing-oriented, would actually be misleading. It's way more complicated than that. One of the loops that's missing is that it depends entirely on the individuals, and there's a lot of variation in the individuals out there.

Another thing that I would like to say about this is that the more I've been able to get into the ayahuasca realm with indigenous Amazonian shamans guiding me, the deeper my respect for their knowledge has gotten. So, obviously, the more you really respect people, and actually look up to them, the more it enhances, well, at least my desire to be useful to them. In other words, it galvanizes me as an activist.

David: *Is what you're describing, what*

*do you think is the most important thing that Western civilization can learn from indigenous shamanism?*

Jeremy: Well, that's speculative. I'm enjoying arguing with your questions; that's what I think questions are for. I don't know what Western society can learn. I mean, for the moment, it's had a hooligan, vampire-like behavior, and it's sucked out what it wanted to suck out--mainly for material benefit--and just spat out the rest. Look at what it did to the Inca temples. It just melted them into gold. And look at how it's treated shamanism for the last five centuries. It said it was the devil's work, or balderdash, and then went on to label shamans as psychotics. We've taken the shamanic plants like tobacco, and look at what we do with them, we turn them into "drugs" that cause harm to health and create addiction. Look at what we've done to coca: turned it into a nasty drug.

So there's been this sort of, I don't know, ghoulish mercantile touch to what Western cultures have done to indigenous cultures. Yes, it's about time it changed, but let's see some action. I don't want to sit here speculating on the sidelines as to what we could learn. I want to incarnate learning. I want to see more people learning, and I don't want to be there saying, oh, if only we could do this, then maybe we could all change, and so forth. Enough already of this telling Western people what they could benefit even more from! Let's start thinking about reciprocity. Let's become lucid about the last five hundred years of history, and what we've imposed. Let's break with it, denounce our own behavior, and show something different.

David: *What are some of the primary things that you think people should be focusing on to help restore ecological balance on our planet?*

Jeremy: I'm not any kind of expert on how to re-equilibrate Western lifestyles; there's a whole bunch of people who talk about that. But I think that the more that we can move away from using hydrocarbons, and the smaller our personal imprints can be, the better. The less light bulbs and everything else that we use, the better. But, nevertheless, here we are having a conversation over a telephone, using tape recorders. The very existence of this conversation in text is the fruit

of the electric world. Because our world seems irremediably electric, there aren't any easy solutions.

But I think that the more of us that can sit with, let's say, both forms of knowledge, the better. In other words, technological knowledge, and let's call the other shamanic knowledge, for telegraphic sake. We're not going to be throwing out the baby with the bath water. We're not going to get rid of science and technology. On the contrary, it's too good to throw out. But, obviously, it needs complementing. It needs critiquing and controlling, let's say.

I think that, for example, one thing that's also really clear for me--but it's also a matter of opinion--is the view that nature is just an object, or a bunch of commodities that we can just exploit it as we wish, has led us to the ecological situation that we're in. I think that it's been a powerful way of coming to dominate nature, treating all those different beings as if they were objects. One can hold that gaze for 2,300 years, and that's what we've just done, but that doesn't mean that it's right. You can treat beings like objects, because, actually, beings are objects--but they're more than just objects, and treating them like just objects is nixing a whole important part of their existence.

So I think that getting away from the objective view of nature, and moving toward a deeper understanding of the other beings with whom we share the planet, would probably be a good move. And that would precisely be a combination of knowledges, using science and shamanism. I mean, in as much as you accept that shamans have some kind of dialogue in their visions with entities that represent other species on this planet, one could consider including them on bioethics committees.

David: *What are some of the most important lessons that you've personally learned from your ayahuasca experiences?*

Jeremy: Well, heck, the whole thing! I guess the first thing was that when I was a twenty-five year old whippersnapper from the suburbs, who had studied chemistry in high school, and thought I knew what reality was, the ayahuasca experience opened my eyes to the fact that there was a whole level of reality that

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one didn't normally see, that there was something that seemed associated with plants, animals, and the forest world--that had a mind-boggling, well intelligence about it. It taught me things, and showed me how stupid I was. It showed me how anthropocentric I was. In French, one says to "deniaisé," which means that it made me less stupid--fast.

It also made me see that there was something there that the materialist-rationalist perspective, which thinks it's so smart, actually didn't get and couldn't get. That kind of defined it, and that made me listen to the indigenous people even more. I just knew there was something there that flew in the face of our categories, and that needed more investigating. And by investigating ayahuasca one was clearly

investigating the indigenous approach to knowledge--but also plants and animals themselves, or nature. In other words, thinking about what it is to be a human being, and what it is to be a human being in the rainforest is to be immersed in this breathing, hooting, scratching environment that's clearly alive. I mean, if you think nature is stupid, all you got do is go into the rainforest at night and listen. It sounds like a bunch of loud electronic musicians. •

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