

Conversations with an **A** Amazonian Shaman



Louise Reitman
Louise@maps.org

We are now
largely mired in
the legacy of a strange
and malignantly
materialistic system,
with a history of slavery,
oppression and
colonialism.

I recently moved from New York City to an off-the-grid mountain cabin, nestled in the redwood forests of Northern California. It's extremely isolated, with grand vistas to behold and abundant wildlife. The beauty of the wilderness is profoundly peaceful. Minimizing the technology in my life, and immersing myself in nature, has been clarifying, relaxing, nourishing, and meditative.

I've come to realize that a lot of the modern conveniences that most "First Worlders" take for granted (innumerable, overflowing markets and stores, electricity, speedy transportation, and widespread technological innovation), as well as all the luxuries that are available to those who can foot the bill, are afforded at the cost of disturbing ecosystems, destroying indigenous peoples' homes and cultures, and supporting a worldwide system of vast inequality. We are now largely mired in the legacy of a strange and malignantly materialistic system, with a history of slavery, oppression and colonialism. I was poignantly reminded of this fact whilst attending a meeting in San Francisco that addressed the current demolition of the Amazon Rainforest by multinational companies. I was invited by my landlady, a social activist who has a cabin near mine; she had been hosting an indigenous Ecuadorian shaman on our property for a few weeks, who I had the chance to talk to. Flavio, the shaman, had come to the states to represent thousands of indigenous people displaced by encroaching oil, gold and coal refineries, and was to be the keynote speaker at this meeting, which was hosted by several American-based, ecological activist nonprofits. Flavio opened his speech by playing a wooden flute that his grandfather had taught him to play. After the song, he related an all-too-familiar tale of being violently pushed off the land and relocated to slums, where he found himself impoverished, starving and unsure of the future. Flavio told me that the jungle was his pharmacy and supermarket. He said that he used ayahuasca, which had been introduced to him by his grandfather, a skilled shaman, and it allowed him conference with the plant world and his ancestors.

a psychedelic person...
 would be apt
 to treat his or her self,
 and the surrounding
 world, with ecstatic
 reverence and
 compassionate
 consideration.

Terence McKenna explained:
Shamanism is the use of the archaic techniques of ecstasy that were developed independent of any religious philosophy--the empirically validated, experientially operable techniques that produce ecstasy. Ecstasy is the contemplation of wholeness. That's why when you experience ecstasy--when you contemplate wholeness--you come down remade in terms of the political and asocial arena because you have seen the larger picture.

I hope more people will embrace a shamanistic, psychedelic mode of living, treating the Earth, its creatures, and other people with ecstatic reverence and compassionate consideration. I, for one, want to learn from Flavio--after all, Flavio and his ancestors have been living sustainably since prehistory in the jungle, passing down knowledge about how to utilize and appreciate the jungle's bounty. In the First World, acceptable habits promote reckless destruction, although often out of our immediate awareness. I feel helpless and sad when I think about Flavio's plight, especially in light of my privileged inhabitation in a beautiful unmarred forest.

I think Albert Hofmann put it most eloquently when he wrote:

I share the belief of many of my contemporaries that the spiritual crisis pervading all spheres of Western industrial society can be remedied only by a change in our worldview. We shall have to shift from the materialistic, dualistic belief that people and their environments are separate, toward a new consciousness of an all-encompassing reality, which embraces the experiencing ego, a reality in which people feel oneness with animals and nature and all of creation.

A psychedelic experience allows a person to release themselves from their egocentric reality and thoroughly and viscerally contemplate innumerable other realities, including the reality of nature: animals, plants, and the elements. If more First Worlders used psychedelics, I believe our culture could halt its destructive pursuit of materialistic luxury.

Unfortunately, however, a majority of the reigning government forces in the First World aim to suppress mind-altering substances. Why are the First World governments so opposed to psychedelic states of consciousness? The pattern of suppression is obvious: from the Spanish Inquisition in Mexico during the 1500s, persecuting those who ate psychedelic mushrooms, to the squabbles over peyote use by Native Americans by the fledgling American government in the nineteenth century, to the current War on Drugs. The revocation of peoples' freedom, and wanton waste and pollution, is preferred over the experience of a non-ordinary state of consciousness. This is probably because psychedelics, when used thoughtfully, empower a person to challenge authority and tradition.

I believe that the disparity between the lifestyles of the First World and the Third World can, essentially, be attributed to their differing climates. This idea solidified when I asked Flavio what he liked the least about America. His answer--the cold, which he found nearly intolerable. Many Third World countries are tropical in climate, with flora and fauna that provide plentiful and variable forms of sustenance. There, psychedelic plants grow abundantly, as compared to the First World countries. Although tropical storms pose a threat, in general, since the weather is always warm, sturdy shelters and provisions for harsher seasons are not necessary.

For those living in inhospitable and cold climates, manipulation of the environment is necessary for simply withstanding the elements. I think that this mindset has just gotten out of hand, or has just turned sour, or something--because the pursuit of materialistic comforts seem to monopolize most First Worlders' time, taking precedence over preserving wildlife and cultural diversity. It's obvious, as evidenced by the amount of prisons, the unbalanced distribution of wealth, increasing desertification, and the cancerous leeching of the First World off other countries, that a drastic intervention needs to be implemented. It seems clear to me that this intervention is the psychedelic experience. •