The Variety of **Ayahuasca** Research:
Psychedelic Science in the 21st Century Conference Report

By Lily Ross, Ph.D. Student

FOR THOSE OF US involved and invested in the promising future use of psychedelic medicines in psychological and spiritual healing, MAPS' Psychedelic Science in the 21st Century conference in April 2010 was as inspiring as it was informative. To those who are most familiar with these medicines as underground recreational drugs, it may have been surprising to see such a professional atmosphere brimming with dedicated, focused, and articulate researchers, scientists, and supporters. Such surprise may have been quickly reoriented to awe, for the work represented within the conference was substantiated by thorough scientific methods and methodologies, indicative of the expanding potential for various psychedelics to be of lasting benefit to persons suffering from a multitude of illnesses and diseases, from PTSD to depression, fear of death, and to an increasingly common hunger for spiritual connection.

After eagerly awaiting the schedule of events, I'll never forget my joy in learning of the abundance of researchers presenting on ayahuasca, the South American brew of *Banisteriopsis caapi* (a vine containing MAO-inhibiting harmala alkaloids) and *Psychotria viridis* (containing DMT). There was an entire track consisting of three days of back-to-back presentations and discussions by researchers from across the globe. The track was born in the wake of an overwhelming number of proposals with relevant and exciting findings in ayahuasca research. When MAPS put out the call to presenters, they had no idea just how powerful the response would be.

Throughout the course of the weekend, many dimensions of ayahuasca work and research were discussed reflecting a diverse range of foci, suggesting the profound healing capacity of this medicine. While each presentation was fascinating, here I'll mention a few which exemplify the wide range of research. In Dr. Silvia Polivoy's talk, "Ayahuasca: Handle with Utmost Care," she delved into some of the key lessons based upon her experience facilitat-

ing psycho-spiritual ayahuasca retreats in Bahia, Brazil, including the risk of ego-inflation and how to address this issue in participants to ease the integration process. David Coyote addressed the many parallels between ayahuasca and Buddhism, their overlapping insights as well as the mutual application of ayahuasca experience and Buddhist practice.

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Sensory and sensual components of ayahuasca journeys were also addressed. Dr. Susana Bustos spoke of the important role of medicine songs, called *icaros,* in ayahuasca ceremonies. She addressed their role in miraculous healing occurrences, and brought awareness to this important element of ayahuasca work. Yalila Espinoza, Ph.D. candidate, discussed her research in "Erotic Healing Experiences with Ayahuasca," touching on the sensual and sexual nature of ayahuasca experiences in the cosmic embodied psychedelic healing experience.

The community of researchers was extremely diverse, working across the world in a number of languages and investigating many areas of the ayahuasca experience. I was struck by the heartfelt respect for the medicine held by each researcher, and a tangible sense of commitment not just to the science, but to the spiritual work of the medicine path—a permeating sense of passion for the work.

The entire conference seemed to buzz with a grounded ecstasy, unanimous excitement, and welcome familiarity. It tightly wove the web of global community, anchoring psychedelic scientific research in an inspiring atmosphere. I know many of us in attendance will long be nurtured by the inspiration gained from the weekend, drawn in part from the hope that a deeper healing will continue and will be made accessible to more and more people across the globe. •

gives the opening talk for tracks 2 and 3; the rising researchers panel; Mark Kleiman, Ph.D., flanked by MAPS staff, introduces Rick Doblin.