



Oneness, Liberation, and Revolutionary Revelations

Observational Research
on Ayahuasca Rituals of
Israelis and Palestinians

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Sentiments for societal change through psychedelic use have existed in Western psychedelic cultures since Albert Hofmann, Ph.D., became the first person to experience the psychedelic effects of LSD in 1943 and the ripples that followed, promising societal change through a shift in consciousness (Saldanha, 2007). Similar sentiments for societal change can be found in some Indigenous and mestizo practices and ayahuasca churches. I'll start by admitting that while nuanced, I still share those sentiments as well. This is my conflict of interest; these are the sentiments I'm up for testing through the praxis of my research and action, and they motivated my observational research on ayahuasca rituals of Israelis and Palestinians. What I will argue here is that the potential for societal change doesn't only derive from oneness, acceptance, and harmony. In fact, my fellow researchers observed that idealization of oneness and harmony can often suppress marginal voices and prevents systemic change. However, revolutionary and often painful revelations have the potential to inspire people to act and resist the status quo.

Through the ethnographic and phenomenological inquiry into Israeli-Palestinian ayahuasca groups, we observed in few participants revelations that reveal the deep injustice done to Palestinians that suffer and activate people with liberative hope. The revelations were rare as they were in opposition to the dominant focus on apolitical oneness. Such oneness was at times in service of the Israeli status quo, but while the rituals we observed attempted to be apolitical, politics inevitably found its way in through revelatory moments.

Much of what follows is based on observational data gathered in 2018 on a month-long road trip in Israel and Palestine. Data collection and research development was a collaboration with Natalie Lyla Ginsberg, M.S.W., a Jewish American social

worker and the Global Impact Officer of MAPS; and Antwan Saca, a Palestinian peace activist and group facilitator. I am the lead researcher, an Israeli living in London and a psychedelic neuroscientist. The data is based on thirty-one interviews of Israelis and Palestinians who drank ayahuasca together, and some complementary ethnographic research and participatory observations in rituals. I've also used the [microphenomenological](#) interview technique to zoom in on specific experiences. We did not organize the rituals – we simply observed and studied them. We intended to learn from the underground practices about the potential of psychedelics for peace and liberation.

The analysis and theoretical understanding summarized here were guided by Dr. Nadeem Karkabi (Roseman and Karkabi, 2021), a Palestinian anthropologist from the University of Haifa, and an expert in Palestinian counter cultures (Karkabi, 2020). Our [paper](#) was published in the *Consciousness Research* section of *Frontiers In Psychology*, under the [Psychedelic Sociality](#) research topic. The theoretical framework used was the Politicized Philosophy of Alain Badiou, mainly described in his “Being and Event” (1988).

Israelis organized most of the observed rituals, and Palestinians were a minority in them, not just by numbers. Most of the facilitation team, including helpers and musicians, were Israelis. Jewish and Israeli music and ritualistic elements were incorporated into the rituals. The language spoken in this context was mainly Hebrew, (which is also spoken by some Palestinians participants in the ceremony). More Israelis were more acquainted with new age and neoshamanic practices – this was evident by clothes and fashion, new-age language, and having more experience in Western spiritual practices.

Most of the observed rituals were part of an ongoing practice and not one-off retreats, hence communities were formed through these rituals. People joined them for personal reasons, such as psychospiritual growth, but there was also an underlying collective intention related to group harmony and oneness. Three relational phenomenological themes were identified and described in detail in the first paper from this project. These themes were 1) connection based on shared humanity; 2) recognition and intercultural/interfaith connection based on differences; and 3) painful and traumatic visions related to the conflict and its history (Roseman et al., 2021).

During the rituals, powerful moments of “human-to-human” connection occurred, and the tensions of the everyday

hierarchical structure were relieved in inspiring moments of oneness, universal love, and identity dissolution. Furthermore, under the ethos of oneness, cultural and religious pluralism was also accepted. For example, a Palestinian woman offered a pluralist take on oneness and suggested that “[in] the merging of all the wavelengths there is the one which encompasses all colours.” It is argued that the expression of diversity “expands the container” and brings more wholeness to the ritual.

Others, outside this study, also suggest this pluralistic take on oneness, and it is argued that oneness doesn't have to contradict identity politics and queerness (Costello and Cassity, 2021). In other words, unity is not the same as uniformity. This idea has an experiential quality observed in our phenomenological analysis. Different aspects of the Arab culture and the Muslim religion were expressed in the ceremonies through songs and prayers. For many Jewish participants, these moments of intercultural and interfaith connection and recognition were mind-expanding, awe-inspiring, and charged people with hope. It was argued that ayahuasca helped people soften their identity and bring people closer to the other culture and religion in case the other culture was expressed in the ritual.

Now, here is the catch. Contexts that idealize universalism and oneness can suppress marginal voices (Roseman and Karkabi, 2021). The particular can appear universal, but only by those who dominate. Furthermore, contexts that idealize oneness and harmony can prevent change.

Other peace researchers have already noted that the “irony in harmony” is that having it as a goal in small groups can lead to pseudo-equality, which prevents attempts of changing larger structural inequality. Oneness has its limits.

The observed ceremonies were mostly organized and guided by Israelis, and the dominance of Israeli culture is natural to this context. Under the ethos of oneness, there was room for pluralism, as long as it was apolitical and non-conflictual. While it is easy to unify Jews and Arabs as offspring of the same ancestral

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patriarch who worship the same God, it is much harder to unify Israelis and Palestinians by their attachment to the same land. Muslim and Arab identities can exist in the Israeli state, but the Palestinian identity and history is denied as it undermines the dominant Israeli narrative. This denial is most potent for those Palestinians who live as citizens in Israel; they are usually referred to as Israeli-Arabs by Jewish Israelis and are pressured to assimilate into Israeli society. As non-Jews, however, they are not fully part of the Israeli nationality and hence could not be

come equal citizens in Israel, as long as Israel remains defined as the nation-state of the Jewish people. The denial of Palestinian history is epitomized by the lack of recognition of the Nakba — the Palestinian collective trauma and the displacement of much of the Palestinian population from their homes in '48. We observed that the ideology of oneness and harmony often supports the denationalization of Palestinians and prevents the emergence of conflictual resistance that challenges the hegemony in the Israeli ritual. The spiritual bypassing of politics. Palestinians are subjugated and occupied by Israelis, and any mention of such oppressor-oppressed duality can burst the oneness.

Yet, there is another catch. As I already mentioned, psychedelics are not only about unity, and sometimes ruptures can occur. What is most suppressed is usually what seeks its way out to puncture our limited knowledge, and this is the Palestinian collective trauma in this case.

Some participants recounted visions of war, conflict, the Nakba, collective and intergenerational trauma, the pain of the land, and the pain of “the Other.” Sometimes such visions ignited people with emancipatory missions. Three such cases are described in much detail in our paper (Roseman and Karkabi, 2021). In all three cases, people experienced powerful revelations of collective trauma and injustice inflicted on Palestinians which then motivated them to intervene in the group ritual. The subject felt separated from the rest of the group and had a painful vision; this vision ignited an intervention — each time in the form of a song — to deliver an emancipatory message to the rest of the group (You can imagine the archetypal prophet here). While the message was particular to the Palestinian trauma, it was experienced as universal. This is not the new-age universalism of “all-is-one,” but the liberative universalism at the core of many revolutionary movements. After the revelatory event, the subject kept their loyalty to the event while seeking to transform reality around them and transform the social dynamics within the ayahuasca ritual. Yet, the status quo pushes back, and the subject is divided by their loyalty to the event and their belonging to the social structure and culture of the status quo.

Take this for example. Ruqaiya (names changed for participant safety) participated with her “tribe” in a Yom Kippur ayahuasca ritual. Yom Kippur — the day of fasting and reparation — is considered the holiest day for Jewish people, so this was an important ritual loaded with religious and political meaning. On that day, Ruqaiya was the only Palestinian person in the ceremony, and the rest were Jewish. During the ceremony, she saw a vision of her daughter being lost into a black hole. Her daughter was relatively assimilated to Israeli culture and considered joining the Israeli army with her Israeli friends. Ruqaiya felt like she is “losing her,” and in the vision, she attempts to pull her daughter from the void. Then, suddenly, an intense prophetic revelation is triggered. Ruqaiya sees intergenerational cycles of

war that began long ago and will continue for much more. She sees mothers who sacrifice their children to the land. She sees the blood dripping into the land. She then feels the pain of the land in her own body and “releases a frequency of anger.” She feels like a messenger and sings the first paragraph of the Quran with powerful confidence. She attempts to reveal the injustice to her Israeli friends, to make them see that Yom Kippur is not only about fasting but also about reparation. The sins are political — denying the freedom of other people. Not everyone resonates with her message, but some do, and some even transform their ways. One Israeli person prevented his daughter from joining the army, based on his experience of Ruqaiya's song and message. Later on, he accompanied Ruqaiya musically when she started facilitating ceremonies. Some in these groups deny the political implication of such revelations. The revelation and anger are commonly psychologized and framed as a cathartic moment that is solely required for her personal healing and “shadow work.” Such framing can see these moments as self-liberation from a political past, but this ignores that the action that follows the revelation is also about changing injustice in society. It is about resistance.

In loyalty to her vision, Ruqaiya attempts to transform reality around her. Not an easy task. She seeks like-minded people to support increasing ayahuasca access to more Palestinians without relying on Israeli facilitation, and in politicizing the practice. For example, in a ceremony conducted a few years later with like-minded spiritual activists, Ruqaiya had a moment of inspiration in which she spoke in biblical Hebrew, accusing the Israelites, who were liberated by Moses, of becoming Pharaohs in modern day. From oppressed to oppressors. While she does this, she still belongs to new-age culture but now trying to expand it to be more politically aware of inequality and injustice and not to be blinded by non-dual axioms. She claims her message is universal and not only related to the Palestinian people. Her guiding star is the emancipation of humanity. Though her revelatory event ruptured the ritual with anger, she followed it with a message of love to humanity and the human spirit. For her, the initial anger and agony are directed towards peace, justice, liberation and love. It is their lack that ignited anger.

Psychedelic-induced traumatic visions are not only personal cathartic healing of our past but also warnings for the future, and so they activate us. Michael Taussig observed this in the amazon and how visions of colonial atrocities done in Putumayo were related to the revolutionary spirit of indigenous people (Taussig, 1991). Walter Benjamin — while escaping the Nazis — noted the universal revolutionary forces which follow collective trauma (Benjamin, 1942). Allen Ginsberg, guided by Leary in a mushroom ritual, had agonizing visions which transformed into a momentary messianic frenzy, running naked attempting to call world leaders and turn them on. This vision

ignited in him a revolutionary spirit, and in his integration he made a pact with Leary to leave institutional exclusivity and bring mystical states to the people (Conners, 2010).

Yet, it is not only visions of trauma that are revolutionary in potentia, but many insights are. Prophetic revelations can ignite movements (Taves, 2016; Wallace 1956). The phenomenological structure of the revelatory moment is also revolutionary — seeing something in a new way is also a calling to change the old way, and **the urge for action is embedded in the insight**. Such revolutionary revelations are associated with confidence and charisma. There is something attractive about them. Eureka is followed by mad excitement. It is not the passive amoral acceptance associated with the mystical union, and it is not even the cathartic letting-go of stored trauma. The revelatory moment is of a subject in relation to their environment — therefore, the need for action is inherent to the event. **Ruqaiya's revelation charged her with confidence and responsibility to act.**

It is important to note, that such revelatory and action-motivating events are not always political. They can also happen to the scientist who is filled with the joy of new enlightenment, the artist with the pleasure of new perceptual intensity, or the lover enchanted with new existential intensity. These are revolutionary moments, and psychedelics can sometimes generate them. So I claim.

Within the field, many deny psychedelics' revolutionary spirit and attempt to detach psychedelics from their counter cultural heritage. Even some from the counter culture itself downplay their own heritage while they rightly develop cynicism of the revolutionary language appropriated by the shroombooming "industry". But it is not just about the ideology and language I'm speaking about but the phenomenological dynamics of psychedelic-induced ruptures.

Yes, there are obvious caveats indeed. Not every psychedelic insight is truth to act upon. Is it just an illusionary reaffirmation of existing knowledge, or is it new? Education is crucial for distinction. It is also crucial so we don't become completely "liberated" from our rationality — losing the sense of what is true or false. This is part of what psychedelics can do — for good, bad and ambiguous — and we need to learn how to work with this in a healthy way for individuals and society. For example, therapeutic frameworks such as liberation psychology can help in integrating such revelatory moments into actions. In such frameworks, the therapist and patient seek to recognize internalized oppression and liberate from it by also becoming agents of sociopolitical change (Brennan, 2020).

Many scholars from different backgrounds consider the mystical union and oneness as elitist. It can have a conservative function that maintains the status quo. This function is healthy as long as society is relatively fair to all its population. What will

happen when psychedelics move into marginal and oppressed communities — will they experience union, or will their experiences be related to liberation from injustice? Will therapists know how to work with this explosive energy and create a conducive container for change? Or will they be excluded? Only time will tell, but until then raising our awareness of the psychedelic process, in combination with political education, can nurture the praxis of insight and action, and may indeed help us change society.

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