

Sample Book Review

GERHARD MAYER

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Arno Adelaars, Christian Räscher & Claudia Müller-Ebeling

Ayahuasca. Rituale, Zaubersäfte und visionäre Kunst aus Amazonien

Baden: AT-Verlag, 2006

ISBN 3-03-800270-4, 312 pages.

Marlene Dobkin de Rios & Roger Rummel

A Hallucinogenic Tea, Laced With Controversy: Ayahuasca in the Amazon and the United States.

Westport, CN, London: Praeger, 2006

ISBN 978-0-313-34542-5, 162 pages.

Beatriz Caiuby Labate, Isabel Santana de Rose & Rafael Guimarães dos Santos

Ayahuasca Religions: A Comprehensive Bibliography and Critical Essays

Santa Cruz, CA: MAPS, Multidisciplinary Association for Psychedelic Studies, 2008

ISBN 978-0-9798622-1-2, 160 pages.

Beatriz Caiuby Labate & Gustavo Pacheco

Opening the Portals of Heaven: Brazilian Ayahuasca Music

(Reihe: Estudos Brasileiros – Brazilian Studies)

Münster: LIT-Verlag, 2010

ISBN 978-3-643-10802-9, 120 pages.

Jeremy Narby, Jan Kounen & Vincent Ravalec

The Psychotropic Mind: The World According to Ayahuasca, Iboga, and Shamanism

Rochester, VT, Toronto: Park Street Press, 2010

ISBN: 978-159477312-9, 184 pages.

A magic potion brewed by the druid Miraculix gave – according to modern legend – a population of a small village in the North of Gaul supernatural powers which considerably interfered with the fun of the Roman legionaries stationed there. Legendary, in a similar way, is the power of the “shaman’s magic drink” ayahuasca (Rätsch, 1998: 7). This psychoactive drug, which also is known under various other names such as Yajé, Daimé and Hoasca, enables undreamed-of visions whose descriptions and phenomenological closeness to paranormal perceptions (Luke 2011) inspired the imagination of explorers even as early as the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century. In 1905, the Columbian pharmacologist Rafael Zerda Bayón isolated a crystalline substance out of the “magic drink” which he called *Telepatina* (= telepathine; cf Ott, 2011: 105) according to its attributed properties. Obviously, this hallucinogenic drug considerably caught the fascination of the psychedelic subcultural movements of the 1960s which experienced a comeback during the 1990s.¹ Keen interest in ayahuasca and its usage has also been shown from various scientific perspectives too: a fascinating research field emerged for ethnologists, ethno-pharmacologists, neuroscientists, anthropologists, scientists of religion, and consciousness researchers, which was reflected in numerous publications.²

Shanon’s basic work

An outstanding work – not only from a scientific perspective – was written by Benny Shanon (2002) who, as a researcher, devoted himself to discovering of inner worlds which had become accessible through the entheogenic substance, all in the spirit of the explorers of the 19th century.

This book entitled *The Antipodes of the Mind: Charting the Phenomenology of the Ayahuasca Experience* was published by the renowned Israeli cognitive psychologist³ as recently as about ten years ago. Therefore, I will abstain from a complete review at this point, and I will confine myself to giving some indications about the contents. For those who want to get an advanced and reflective insight into the world of ayahuasca experience, this work is of great value. In addition to a detailed phenomenological description of experiences such as, for example, the kinds of visions or different types of a modified perception of time which is based on his own experience as well as on numerous interviews with ayahuasca drinkers, the book provides a discussion of different theoretical framings, explanatory approaches and attempts at clas-

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- 1 Adelaars (1998: 33) comments on the various usages of the drug in European countries: “Since the introduction of ayahuasca in Europe in the early nineties, four different types of rituals can be distinguished: Religious, therapeutical, recreational and experimental.”
 - 2 To mention only two works which can be used for further reading: Luke (2011) provides an overview of the current state of research of the phenomenology and psychopharmacology of Ayahuasca and of the psychoactive substance DMT. In Znamenski (2007: 147-164) one can find a description of the importance which of “power plants” Amazonian shamanism for the development of contemporary Western shamanism (neoshamanism).
 - 3 Homepage: <http://pluto.huji.ac.il/~bshanon/> [accessed: 26.4.2011].

sification, as well as considerations about philosophical implications which emerge with such findings.

One of the key experiences under the influence of Ayahuasca which fascinated Shanon as a cognitive psychologist in a particular way, and which encouraged him to spend a whole sabbatical year investigating the phenomenon in Brazil and Peru, was that of *cognitive universals*. The intercultural comparison of reports of ayahuasca experiences showed a perplexing identity of sometimes very specific contents, such as snakes and jaguars, but also palaces, whole cities, and much more. Shanon discusses different attempts to explain this phenomenon, not accepting the non-naturalistic (spiritualistic, paranormal) explanations (preferred by most of the ayahuasca drinkers) from his perspective of a scientific psychologist. However, he also rejects the biologically-reductionist explanation (that the universality of the visions is directly caused by a common neuro-anatomic structure and the resultant brain activity) as being deficient. Similarly, he is dissatisfied with the explanation that the visions are to be ascribed to the 'rising' of unconscious contents of memory or consciousness under the influence of the drug (bypassing the 'inner censor', and / or reduction of the filter function of perceptual structures in 'ordinary state of consciousness'). The – prima facie – most apt theoretical approach in the field of scientific psychology seems to be that of Carl Jung (1976) who describes, and tries to explain, similar universals with the concepts of archetypes and of the collective unconsciousness. However, Shanon criticises the insufficient theoretical foundation and clarity of these concepts ("except for stating that these phenomena do in fact exist, the term 'collective unconscious' does not explain anything (...) the nature of the Jungian archetypes is far from being clear" – p. 390) and points to the differences in content between Jung's archetypes and the universals of the ayahuasca experience, although one can discover some similarities on a micro-level of analysis.⁴

In his philosophical reflections with which Shanon concludes the volume, he draws a comparison to other areas of human consciousness activity in which universals are detected and the question of the ontological status which has remained unresolved until now: to mathematics, to music, to language acquisition of children (Chomsky's thesis of an universal grammar) as well as to myths. Whereas one can find, in the first three areas, common features in formal structure, they consist of the areas of myth and of ayahuasca experiences on the content level. Shanon rejects a psychoanalytical as well as a platonic interpretation (Plato's theory of forms) of the universals. He advocates a third possibility, namely to understand them as an expression of human creativity: "According to that, ayahuasca visions reflect neither what is hidden in the mind of the drinker nor mind-independent, Platonic-states of affairs, but rather, they are the works of creation" (p. 396). In addition:

"Creation is, of course, a standard cognitive-psychological notion. Yet, the creative accomplishments discussed here are far from being standard. First, the creative power at

4 Shanon comments on this as follows: "Thus, an ironical state of affairs obtains. Empirically, the Jungian data parallel those revealed by Ayahuasca visions; yet theoretically, the Jungian archetypes fail to explain the concrete communalities of contents in both Ayahuasca visions and the visions and other materials Jung himself investigated" (p. 391).

hand is extraordinary. Second, while unbounded it is subject to constraints: there are some specific contents that are more likely to be created than others. These [...] do not reflect the life history, knowledge, or concerns of the individual drinker and they even seem not to be specific to members of any particular cultural group. Thus, it appears that human beings, while not storing in their memories ideas of these specific semantic contents, are built in such a fashion as to be likely to imagine them” (pp. 398-399).

The serious scientific approach of Shanon is characterized by this quest for a scientific classification and a philosophical understanding of what is experienced, as well as his confession that there continue to be – despite these attempts – a lot of open questions, and the ayahuasca experiences remain an enigma.

The “magic potion” ... popularly scientifically brewed

Such an approach can only seldom be seen with the authors of the German book *Ayahuasca. Rituale, Zaubertränke und visionäre Kunst aus Amazonien* published in 2006. In no way is the impression conveyed that questions about the ontological nature of visions and experiences under the influence of the entheogenic drink would remain open. “Spirits of plants” and the “Otherworld” apparently constitute realities independent of individual people which are not called into question anymore. Indeed, two of the three authors of the book are also scientists, and they demonstrate that they know the rules of the “scientific game” – the ethno-pharmacologist Christian Räsch and the art historian Claudia Müller-Ebeling – but the volume has obviously not been conceived for (scientific) colleagues. It is rather aimed at a popular scientific audience, and is backed up by further volumes by the authors which are almost consistently dedicated to the ethno-botanical and art-historical portrayals of different psychoactive plants. Most of these books are sophisticatedly and appealingly designed, providing a lot of illustrations and photographs, and published by the Swiss AT Verlag. The reviewed book, which is also brought out by this publisher, is slightly differently designed: it is smaller with more stress laid on the texts, and illustrations are in black and white with the exception of four glossy pages with color illustrations in the middle of the book. Furthermore, the three authors – the third one is the Dutch journalist Arno Adelaars – did not write the text collectively, instead the book consists of three independent sections with each author being responsible for one. The first section, dedicated to ethno-botanical and ethno-pharmacological aspects, is presented by Räsch. The second section is written by Müller-Ebeling and entitled *Ayahuasca-Visionen und Kunstreflexionen* [= Ayahuasca Visions and Reflections on Art]. It deals with symbolic forms, structures, artefacts, and ayahuasca-inspired contemporary art. However there is also a chapter written by Räsch on “Ayahuasca Music”. The third section is authored by Adelaars and entitled *Rituale* [= Rituals]. It includes chapters and parentheses based on participant observation of the use of ayahuasca in different contexts, and on interviews with participants and concerned actors.

In general, a good substantial knowledge of the topics covered and an intrinsic interest in the subject of the book can be assessed. Räsch, who produced together with Albert Hofmann,

the ethno-pharmacological standard reference *The Encyclopedia of Psychoactive Plants* (2005), introduces the mythical and historical-cultural roots of ayahuasca in the first section of the book, and its discovery by Western researchers. He then covers the pharmacological effects on the human physical constitution, describes preparation, forms of usage, different recipes, and its combination with other psychoactive substances. His remarks are well-informed and show a depth of experience. However, Rättsch occasionally looses his descriptive and rather prosaic style, and then his writing takes on a missionary tone and/or the style of an advertising text, for instance, as follows:

“Ayahuasca is the ethno-botanic center of the culture in South American Amazon region. It is much more than a simple remedy; it is an entheogen, a shamanic magic drink. Ayahuasca affects the body as well as the mind, and it harmonizes the two. It cleanses, regenerates and heals the body, giving visions and insights into the mind. Ayahuasca reveals the cause of suffering to the invalid and helps him overcome it; for a healthy man, it is beneficial and refreshing, supporting his spiritual growth.” (p. 23, translation by G.M.)

What already characterizes the first section – a rather unstructured compilation of parts of texts – applies even more for the second section of the book. Although there a rough segmentation, it partly is not compelling due to the fact that the type of texts and the quality of the component parts often change. Paragraphs containing cultural criticism in a simple style alternate with ethnological and science-of-art paragraphs which are rather associatively interwoven and furnished with quotes of highly diverse provenance. One wonders, for example, what may be the reason for providing an illustration of a North American native in a paragraph on musical instruments of Amazonia or in the context of the use of ayahuasca (p. 132). The chapter “Ayahuasca-Musik” [Ayahuasca Music], written by Rättsch, is also a motley text. The *icaros* (traditional ayahuasca chants) are described, there is talk of synesthesia, the famous German music journalist Joachim-Ernst Berendt is quoted, conch shell trumpets are introduced as musical instruments (why not in the preceding paragraph which is particularly dedicated to musical instruments?), in a short part of the text the *Himnos* (correctly: *Hinos*) which are important for the ayahuasca religion *Santo Daime* (of which more later in this review) are mentioned, the “psychoactive Muses” (p. 147) of musicians and composers such as Hector Berlioz, Richard Strauss, and Olivier Messiaen are addressed, there is talk of Sting’s “Message In A Bottle” and techno music (“Techno is the most consequent transmutation of archaic shaman music into the technological information age” – p. 151).

The last chapter of the second section covers various contemporary visual artists whose work is characterized by ayahuasca or other DMT-containing substances. Due to my lack of own knowledge on this subject, I am not able to assess if the representation in this second part of the book meets the academic criteria of the art-historical or musicological disciplines. A sense of skepticism may, however, be suggested on the basis of the given references.

The most compelling, and for many maybe the most interesting, section is the third one, written by Adelaars. The stated aim of providing an overview on the various forms of the usage

of ayahuasca in ritual contexts is achieved by the author. Adelaars, as a journalist and expert on hallucinogenic drugs, has a similar broad experience with the entheogen in a similar way to the two other authors. They spent approximately a month together in Columbia researching for the book; the results form the first part of his contribution. There he presents the healing work of different indigene *Ayahuasceros* i.e. shamans who work with the hallucinogenic tea as a medicine. He does this partly by reporting on the procedure of such rituals, and partly by reproducing interviews with *Ayahuasceros*. In this way, critical aspects are not ignored, for example, the so-called ayahuasca tourism with the Peruvian city of Iquitos as its centre. In the words of the author: “One gets the impression that ten percent of the residents are shamans. Ayahuasca is a big business in Peru” (p. 211 – translation by G.M.).

With a further paragraph, Adelaars describes the different ayahuasca churches of Brazil in a relatively compact manner, and thereafter modern rituals in the West (p. 245ff.) concerning primarily so-called “Do-it-yourself rituals” (DIY). These ceremonies are usually conducted by an experienced ayahuasca drinker, but are not, however, embedded in a traditional context. In the same way as in the traditional context, a huge diversity of forms and styles exists: “The modern masters of ceremony draw inspiration from their own ayahuasca experiences with shamans, with Santo-Daime ceremonies, and with modern ceremonies. DIY ceremonies, therefore, always are eclectic. Their quality differs greatly; in this, they also have lot in common with rituals in traditional ayahuasca regions” (p. 246 – translation by G.M.). Adelaars himself conducted many such ceremonies, and reports his experiences of them, also including problematic aspects. In the paragraph “Lauernde Fallen” [lurking pitfalls] he deals with problems of cultural transfer and mentions the three most important: the “pitfall of money”, the “pitfall of recognition”, and the “pitfall of ego and power”. Whilst the first is related to the corruption of indigenous shamans by ‘Western money’, the second concerns ‘westerners’ who feel ennobled and superior due to the contact with indigenous shamans, to respective experiences and a shamanic ‘initiation’, as the case may be. The third pitfall is based on the tendency to feelings of omnipotence which can be elicited from the entheogen. A further paragraph introduces three interviewed people who each report their different experience with the entheogen in our modern Western society.

Adelaars succeeds in keeping good balance between his own experience and other people’s experiences, abdicating a strongly moralizing and proselytizing, but also idealizing, attitude – an impression which does not consistently emerge in the course of reading the book. Hence, the “warning” in the edition (“[...] authors and publisher decline all responsibility for misuse of illegal substances to which the text may inspire” – translation by G.M.) is not by chance. Altogether, this is a vaguely structured book which is assembled from different types of texts which constitute very divergent scientific levels – probably due to the marketing strategy of the publisher, and to the commercial pressure to survive as a freelance writer. However, despite the shortcomings, primarily from a scientific perspective, one can gain an introductory insight into the “ayahuasca complex”, precisely due to the heterogeneity of the texts, as well as the ambiguity the authors shine a light on many – also ambivalent – aspects of the fascination of this “magic potion”.

Fascination and ambivalence in dialogue

Fascination and ambiguity – both cross one’s mind when reading the trialog by anthropologist Jeremy Narby, filmmaker Jan Kounen, and author and filmmaker Vincent Ravalec on ayahuasca, iboga (an African hallucinogenic plant), and shamanism. This trialog, which was conducted in French, was transcribed, translated, and published by Park Street Press (2010) and entitled *The Psychotropic Mind*. Narby and Kounen in particular have been instrumental in the popularization of the ayahuasca complex during the last few years, initially Narby with his immensely popular book *Le serpent cosmique, l’ADN et les origines de savoir* (1995; English translation: *The Cosmic Serpent*, 1999). Kounen reviewed his experiences with ayahuasca, Shipibo indians, and Amazonian shamanism with his motion picture *Blueberry* (2004) and the documentary film *D’autres mondes* (2004) in a visually spectacular manner. A list of twelve groups of themes was put together for the trialog, which took place in March 2007, in order to organize the discussion. In addition to biographical aspects of the approach and of individual experiences with ayahuasca (and also with iboga, for Ravalec), risks and dangers, problems of cultural transfer, questions of therapeutic effects, and also cultural critical topics in general are raised. The discussion style makes the book easily readable, and it is of value to the circle of interested people because the discussion shows the huge wealth of experience of the people involved, presenting inspiring ideas, and mediating the liveliness of direct conversation. However, the disadvantages of such a style also become apparent: rather loosely ordered thoughts with often no concision, a certain verbosity containing redundancies with its meandering style, as well as the personal vanities and subjectivisms coming through.

However, what likewise becomes clear is the persistent fascination of the use of the entheogen substance which still appeals to the discussion partners – even after longer-lasting experiences which were not always pleasant. Kounen, for example, flies – after his own account – a few times every year to Peru for the purpose of participating in emotionally intense ayahuasca sessions. We may agree with his comment on the book:

It seems to me after rereading this book that we already have something here that is pretty unique in the sense that it offers a lot of little tips for anyone who might be curious or even tempted to try the experience. It is not just a kind of Backpacker’s Guide to ayahuasca, but a bit more: “Here, keep your eyes out for this, watch out for that; things are okay there.” How to begin a session, how to experience it, how to pay attention to your thoughts afterward. (p. 126)

However, what distinguishes this volume from a “Backpacker’s Guide” is that it is low-structured which leads to the fact that one does not find the useful information in a well-ordered and bundled way, instead it needs to be collected from different places. As the trialog here and there refers to books and films of the conversation partners, as well as to several prominent shamans, it is an advantage if the reader already knows these works and has prior knowledge of the topics of discussion (ayahuasca, shamanism, neo-shamanism, complementary medicine etc.).

Two points should be stressed in particular: the ambivalence of the wish to pass on knowledge and insights gained using ayahuasca, and its worldview-changing effects. The history of

the reception to the authors' books shows that, in many readers, they elicit the wish to try out ayahuasca (and/or iboga) themselves. This is essentially relevant for ayahuasca tourism mentioned above – with consequences which are evaluated by the authors as not only being positive. The problem of unreasonable idealization, hopes (e.g. of healing), and projections is likewise mentioned, as is the danger of addiction to the shamans who, indeed, can be 'false' shamans and/or only concerned with advantages for themselves, and who exploit the openness of the participants which is induced by the ayahuasca drink. Since the psychical state during, and especially for a certain time period afterwards, the ingestion of the drink resembles – at least on a superficial phenomenological level – a manic state of mind. Narby comments:

I have noted that, depending upon who you drink ayahuasca with, all at once it opens the hearts of people who are perfect strangers to each other. You find yourself experiencing bursts of generosity that you would not be having in cold, lucid consciousness. So, it is an empathogen as well; and this is not to say that you must be wary of empathy, but let's just say it is worth the effort to keep yourself informed and keep a slight distance in connection to what you can feel during these experiences. I have one rule: during the forty-eight hours after the experience, I take no action in the real world. No matter what I saw in my visions, I do not reach for the telephone right away (p. 66).⁵

The dangers which are associated with such a psychical state of mind are obvious, even if problematic cases are reported only very rarely in the scientific literature on ayahuasca. In general, a mentally unstable condition and a personality disorder of the schizophrenic spectrum in particular is regarded as being a contraindication for 'Westerners' – and this, incidentally, applies to all strongly mind-altering substances. How disturbing and strong the experiences with this entheogen can be is repeatedly discussed during the trialog.

For example, Kounen depicts how he put his plan to produce a feature film on ice because his worldview had been radically changed by the experiences. He speaks of a "radical system shift" which he had gone through (p. 5).⁶ In the introduction to his aforementioned book *Antipodes of Mind*, Shanon reports similar experiences:

Ayahuasca introduces one to realms that pertain to religion, to faith, to the Divine. A significant number of the Ayahuasca sessions in which I participated were conducted

5 See also pp. 28-29 and pp. 118-119.

6 Kounen: "Once you are there and you've entered that world – and that's how it was for me, I don't know why, but I entered it quite quickly – this world alters you. It's not about making a movie anymore. At some point, you find yourself in front of your glass of ayahuasca. Already, before you even drink it, you are no longer a filmmaker gathering information; you are a human being facing an experience. And if you experience something, and it is strong, the next day the person you see in the mirror is not a filmmaker who had beautiful visions for making a film but a poor wretch who's been completely shaken up" (p. 20). And elsewhere: "It is not a distortion of reality, it is an entire other reality that is superimposed over reality, which remains reality" (p. 34).

in the context of groups with specific doctrines and religious beliefs. However, from the beginning I decided to keep to my own personal path. This was because I am Jewish and these groups are Christian (or semi-Christian), because I wanted to conduct objective research, and most of all because by my very nature I am fundamentally an individualistic freethinker. For years I have characterized myself as a 'devout atheist'. When I left South America I was no longer one. I did not, despite strong encouragement, become a member of any of the groups I associated myself with nor do I have any intention of doing so in the future. But my *Weltanschauung* has radically changed. I decided to write a book about all this (2002: 8-9).

Such experiences – which led in one case to a temporary abandonment of an already financed project, and caused in another case a year-long sabbatical break from professional teaching and research activities – often appear alongside a messianic impulse, which is noted in all three of the above-mentioned books. In spite of the critical aspects, which are also taken into consideration by the dialog discussion panel, ayahuasca tourism and the changes of indigenous shamanism by Western influences are not viewed as fundamentally negative. It seems rather a relatively natural process of cultural change which had always accompanied the history of humanity. First and foremost, illusions of a pure, noble, authentic shaman were western projections.

Drug tourism and 'new shamans'

Another assessment is given by Marlene Dobkin de Rios and Roger Rumrill in their book *A Hallucinogenic Tea, Laced with Controversy: Ayahuasca in the Amazon and the United States* which is, in most parts, a critical "encyclical" against recent developments. Dobkin de Rios is an anthropologist and family therapist located in California, and one of the pioneers of ethnological exploration of hallucinogenic plants in the Amazonas region. In the late 1960s she conducted field studies in Peru and published a multitude of essays and books regarding her results.⁷ Roger Rumrill, the Peruvian writer and journalist, is an expert on cultural and cultural-political topics concerning the Amazon region. His field of expertise includes drug traffic and drug tourism. The slim volume has been released by the well-known publishing house Praeger. Because of its plain style and high sale price, it is meant for a scientific audience. These may be the best attributes for creating the corresponding expectations for the book; unfortunately they can only be fulfilled partially. Like all the other books discussed, it expresses, as expected, a great deal of experience and knowledge of the topic, however, it does not seem to be one consistent piece, in a similar way to Adelaars *et al.* In spite of a clear separation into main chapters, a rigorous contextual structure is missing, and, in a similar way to the previously discussed books, contains numerous redundancies. The reason for the missing homogeneity probably lies in the fact, that it is a compendium of texts which have been published in another context, and only seem to

7 Cf Dobkin de Rios, 2009. For this book de Rios wrote an overview of her life as an anthropologist (pp. 8-56).

have been slightly revised for this publication. In comparison, it contains only few references, for a scientific paper. Indeed, this benefits the good readability, and one gets the impression that the authors could provide evidence for most of their claims, but strong self-references leave an unpleasant taste (almost a quarter of all the references in the bibliography is related to works by Dobkin de Rios).

The chapters concern the native usage of ayahuasca (chapter 2), drug tourism (chapter 3), 'New Shamans' (chapter 4), the ayahuasca religion *União do Vegetal* (chapter 5), and the subjects of globalization and future developments with regard to the usage of ayahuasca (chapter 6). However, in every chapter the reader encounters arguments on issues which should rather be reserved for another chapter, such as when a paragraph of the chapter 'Drug Tourism' is captioned with 'The New Shamans', which is also the title of the forth chapter. Concerning the contents, some paragraphs are almost literally copied. In a similar way to Adelaars *et al.*, this book combines different sorts of text. Summaries of parts of old field studies conducted by de Rios alternate with culture-critical and psychological/psychotherapeutical texts as well as transcripts of interviews with indigenous healers and shamans conducted by Rumrill and Rumrill and de Rios. The different 'timbres of voices' of the book can not only be explained by the (probably not well synchronized) double authorship. Furthermore, the different roles de Rios fills/filled in her work influence the respective tones of voice. As an anthropologist, she adopts the classical ethnological attitude which is still common to many researchers in this field, presuming that authenticity only occurs in 'pure' cultures uninfluenced by the developments of modern civilizations. As a psychotherapist, she warns of the consequences of drug tourism and getting caught in the clutches of 'false healers' – but does not shy away from dramatizing ("This situation is a public health menace" – p. 72). In some places you find a prosaically distanced and reductionist-skeptical attitude referring to evolutionary biology and cognitive/social psychology with the intention of establishing the usage of ayahuasca as a functional "psycho-technology" to increase suggestibility:

Biologically speaking, suggestibility can be seen as a device that gives the individual a way to adapt to harsh reality – by means of denial, illusion, and false or overly optimistic beliefs. This enables the person to cope with stress and conflicts in his environment and confers crucial survival advantage. Human beings appear to have evolved as suggestible animals because of survival needs. Suggestibility allows an individual to transcend reality, become cohesive with his social group, allow himself to discharge negative emotions, and turn away from himself – a good escape from trauma and irreconcilable conflict (p. 15-16).

And further:

This "psycho-technology" is significant in enabling groups of people to be successful in the struggle to survive, despite a difficult and often hostile environment. This is a corruption of reality, as hunters and gatherers create illusions of environmental control in order to insulate themselves from the experience of emotional depression. This is necessary, given that fear of imminent starvation or death could cause real trauma to a person's emotional

integrity. People create many illusions, and throughout history, illusion and self-deception have existed (p. 18).

In other passages you can read the admiring descriptions of a native healer's work, which almost seem like a paranormal ability, and his unusual appearance. This is a testament to an enthusiastic and deeply involved young field researcher⁸ and sometimes leads to contradictory reasoning. One example here is when – according to the common rationalist-reductionist orientated attitude – the “psycho-technology” of “illusion and self-deception” tied to the indigenous magical view of the world is described as the wish to reduce fear and gain control over existential contingency.⁹ On the other hand it is pointed out that these perceptions are tied up with fears of magical influence and witchcraft, which massively influences the everyday life of the local population.

Primarily chapters 3 and 4 (“Drug-tourism” and “New shamans” respectively) have, in general, a strong appellative character which one does not expect in a scientific paper, belonging rather to other interest groups and organizations (such as sect/cult advice centers, humanistic information pamphlets etc.). In a, partially strongly polemical style, the – indeed in some respects alarming – development of the past two decades is subjected to criticism. This focuses on nearly everything: on money-mad “new shamans”, self-referential and naïve drug tourists and esoteric practitioners, young Indians and mestizos who disregard their own traditions and are interested in the developments of the western modernity etc. – in short: everything seems to have been better before. However, there are a few sporadic passages relativizing these opinions which had been vehemently made immediately beforehand, for example, the section entitled “An Opposite Point of View” (p. 80-82) as well as the penultimate subchapter (“Constructivism”), in which it is acknowledged that culture, as a dynamic construct, is constantly evolving (p.146-147). This seems strange, and the question arises as to the reasons for such an inhomogeneity, and what the authors really intend. The most interesting parts of the book are those written in a strictly descriptive style, together with the interviews of two shamans conducted by Rumrill. In particular, the conversation with Guillermo Arevalo (in the book “Arrévalo”) demonstrates a well-balanced and differentiated analysis of the situation which contrasts pleasantly with the often stereotypical positions of the authors.¹⁰ De Rios and Rumrills’ book is not suited to giving an initial and neutral overview of the “ayahuasca complex”. For those who are

8 During her stay in Iquitos (1968-1969) de Rios worked as a fortune teller for the local population – a role she took on involuntarily according to her own statement (cf pp. 36-37).

9 Normally a blind eye is turned to the fact that this is merely a hypothesis – as it is in this case.

10 Arevalo might currently be the most prominent indigenous Shipibo shaman in Europe who chose the path out of the urban modern age and back into the jungle after his interest for traditional medicine was ignited during his studies in pharmacology, and he undertook a challenging and tedious shamanistic apprenticeship. Both the volume written by Avelaar *et al.* and the trialog between Narby, Kounen and Ravalec refer to him. In Kounen's movie *Blueberry* he plays the role of an old shaman, and he is also introduced in the documentary *D'autres mondes* by Kounen.

particularly interested in recent developments in ayahuasca tourism, it is an important source which, however, has to be read critically. Moreover, stimulating information on further topics is delivered that enrich the impression gained from other books. Insofar, my concluding opinion mirrors the ambivalence which characterizes the book itself.

In the volume reviewed above, as well as in Adelaars *et al's* book, a general problem is mentioned that is linked with the discourse about ayahuasca in most western-oriented societies: the problem of illegality (Narcotics Law) and the consequently difficult availability of the entheogen. As not everyone is able to undertake an expedition to the Amazonas region, the question for alternatives is raised for curious people. This becomes obvious in a review of the book of Adelaars *et al.* on the German internet page of the bookseller *Amazon*:

The good thing about the book is, however, that the authors provide many hints which should make it possible to get in contact with authentic Amazonian shamans and/or religious groups such as, for example, Santo Daime here, too, in Europe, especially in the Netherlands or in Switzerland (translation by G.M.).¹¹

The following possibilities on how to get hold of the 'pleasure of the magic potion'¹², despite the legal situation, are suggested: Workshops with indigenous shamans from the Amazonas region which are most commonly offered in neighboring countries (Switzerland, The Netherlands) with a more liberal law, as well as religious groups that have made the use of ayahuasca into a fundamental part of their ritual practice.

Ayahuasca religions

Such religious groups go back to three Brazilian syncretistic religions for which, at the beginning of the new millennium, the term "Brazilian ayahuasca religions" was coined (Labate *et al.*, 2008: 25): The *Santo Daime*, the *União de Vegetal* (UDV), and the *Barquinha*.¹³ All three religions originate in Brazilian state of *Acre* (in the Amazon region) which is located on the border to Bolivia and Peru. The former Bolivian region was inhabited by Brazilian immigrants

11 http://www.amazon.de/Ayahuasca-Rituale-Zaubertränke-visionäre-Amazonien/dp/3038002704/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1303220705&sr=8-1 [accessed: 19.4.2011]

12 Putting the term 'pleasure' into parentheses is an appropriate relativization, insofar as the drinking of Ayahuasca tea usually involves nausea with the accompanying physiological symptoms (cf. Shanon, 2002: 8).

13 *Santo Daime* is the oldest of these three religions, being founded by Raimundo Irineu Serra (Mestre Irineu) in around 1930. The founding year of the *União de Vegetal* (founder: José Gabriel da Costa = Mestre Gabriel) is 1961, and the smallest one of the three religions, *Barquinha*, was founded in 1945 (founder: Daniel Perreira de Mattos = Mestre Daniel). The anthropologist Carsten Balzer (2003) published a detailed work (in the German language) on *Barquinha*, in which some information about the other ayahuasca religions can also be found.

that consisted primarily of rubber tappers. Due to relations with the indigenous people and the *caboclos* (mestizos of indigenous and European descent), they were acquainted with the use of ayahuasca. Indeed, the three founding fathers of the ayahuasca religions were immigrants and came from the northeastern region of Brazil to find their fortune in the rubber boom which was at that time – in the first half of the twentieth century – already in decline. Due to relevant experiences which were accompanied by (inner) visions they each felt called upon to found a religion.

These religions were increasingly acknowledged outside Brazil, and got their first followers in other countries in the late 1980s. The spread of these religious groups has been accompanied by an intensified scientific interest, fascinating on the one hand as a typical Brazilian expression of religiousness, and, on the other, mainly due to their ritualized usage of the hallucinogen as a “sacrament”. The book *Ayahuasca Religions: A Comprehensive Bibliography & Critical Essays* highlights how strongly this interest is reflected in scientific studies from the last two decades. It is one of two recommended small volumes on this topic, in which the anthropologist Beatriz Caiuby Labate was involved as an author. Additionally, the social anthropologist Isabel Santana de Rose and the biologist Rafael Guimarães dos Santos collaborated on this bibliography, of which the English translation was published by the US-American organization MAPS (Multi-disciplinary Association For Psychedelic Studies). The authors counted 52 published books, 90 published papers, 52 PhD and MA theses, as well as 70 Conference Papers regarding ayahuasca religions in Brazil alone (as of 2007). Outside of Bras they found 33 books, 124 papers und 36 scientific theses, where, after the English-speaking region, mainly Germany and Spain can be regarded as ‘prolific research landscapes’. The first two-thirds of the book contain – aside from a (readable) foreword – two articles which give an overview of the history and the current state of research regarding the ayahuasca religions. Whereas the first introduces publications from different sources and academic disciplines – which includes not only scientific literature –, the second focuses on pharmacological, psychiatric and psychological research. The last third of the book provides an extensive bibliography of the ayahuasca religions. The text is also illustrated with black and white pictures regarding these religions. It is a balanced and highly helpful work, full of thoughtful critical comments which is vital to everyone who wants to approach this topic in a scientific manner.

The other recommended book by Labate, which she authored together with the ethnomusicologist Gustavo Pacheco, concerns a particular, only scarcely researched aspect so far, namely ayahuasca religions and the significance of musical forms of expression and elements in a ritual context. The thin volume (containing less than 120 pages) is entitled *Opening the Portals of Heaven: Brazilian Ayahuasca Music*. This is also an English translation of a text written in Portuguese, and it is published by a German publisher. This is due to the fact that it was supported by the German Research Council (Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft – DFG) and the Collaborative Research Center “Ritual Dynamics – Socio-Cultural Processes from a Historical and Culturally Comparative Perspective”.¹⁴ This reference should be indicative of a certain qual-

14 Labate was a member of a team around Rolf Verres at the Institute of Medical Psychology in Heidel-

ity, and this is actually the case with this book. In particular, it provides a concise description of the topic which makes you feel the knowledge of the object of research which is saturated by fieldwork-based experience though this is not indicated everywhere throughout the book as a quality criterion. In favor of the clear-cut argumentation and the stringent composition, much valuable information is given in the footnotes. The text is complemented with some photographs as well as transcriptions of four *hinos* (hymns).

In the foreword the authors clarify that they deal with the ritual music of urban musical forms of the ayahuasca religiousness (*Santo Daime*, *União do Vegetal* as well as their new branches and subgroups); the musical forms of expression of the indigenous population using ayahuasca, the so-called *Icaros*, remain largely unconsidered. Their main goal was to broaden the perspective on the ayahuasca religions beyond the (merely) psychopharmacological aspect. The study is the result of ten years (!) of field research into different groups in various regions of Brazil. The *Barquinha* religion had to remain disregarded – partly due to the limited field experience of the authors with groups from this branch, and partly due to difficulties of gaining access to their *Salmos* (psalms). This highlights a fundamental problem which the authors encountered: a quite complex conglomeration of interests pursuing, on the one hand, scientific standards, objectiveness, and the deepest possible insight, and striving, on other hand, to respect religious content und rituals which, for example, includes the concealment of certain elements for religious reasons (for example, restrictions on listening to tape recordings of so-called *Chamadas* [cantations] of the União do Vegetal) or due to political, or rather judicial reasons.

The basic ethical and methodological reflections at the beginning of the book are followed by an introduction to the *Santo Daime* religion and its derived forms with its typical use of music which is central to the rituals. These are the mediumistically ‘received’ (‘psycho-auditive’) Mestre Irineu *hinos* (hymns) during the rituals which are subsequently sung by the group members during the religious services. The hymns which are then also ‘received’ by other believers were compiled into little books (*hinarios*). The musical involvement of as many participants as possible during the rituals is the aim. The singing of the hymns and the rhythmical accompaniment of the music using *Maracas* (rattles) is required. The following part of the book introduces the general role of music with the *União de Vegetal*, and particularly that of the *chamadas*. In this religion, the *chamadas* are understood as invocations of spiritual forces during the service. They are performed only by one person at a time. Two further chapters deal with the common roots (indigenous and *caboclo* cultures of Amazonia, ramifications of popular Catholicism, and Afro-Brazilian religiousness) of and the differences (the importance of the spoken word, the esthetic point of view, reference to tradition, questions of control and hierarchy, routine, and charisma) between the two branches of the ayahuasca religions. A final chapter reflects in a synopsis on the various functions of music in the context of religious rituals and altered states of

berg who is in charge of the study *Ritualdynamik und Salutogenese beim Gebrauch und Missbrauch psychoaktiver Substanzen (RISA)* in the context of the Collaborative Research Center. Cf <http://www.klinikum.uni-heidelberg.de/RISA-Studie.5659.0.html?&FS=robots.txt>

consciousness whose importance could hardly be overestimated, but also reflects on the problems which are involved with the transcription and interpretation of oral traditions. At the end, the authors refer to a – actually trivial – point which, however, can be easily overlooked: “These musical journeys to other regions of the cosmos and of oneself, however, will never be reached in their plenitude through a book: nothing substitutes experience” (p. 96).¹⁵

A pleasant feature of the book is that one gets, in addition to the remarks on the eponymous ethno-musicological topic, a well-founded short introduction to the two large Brazilian ayahuasca religions. Furthermore, the comparison of these two forms distinctly demonstrates different developments and priority setting of religions with common roots and a similar cultural context. It remains an open question as to which facts these differences in the developments are ultimately based on, and this would be worth a separate analysis.

Finally, I will once again briefly mention the bibliography of ayahuasca religions provided by Labate *et al.* Its foreword which is written by social anthropologist Oscar Calávia Saez deserves a particular mention because on less than five pages it outlines many crucial aspects of the diversity of the ayahuasca complex, and, furthermore, provides some interesting and rewarding thoughts which broaden the perspective, albeit concerning the indigenous use of ayahuasca. One function of ayahuasca is that of an “othering key” which shows – like a mirror gives inverted images – inverted aspects or point of views “which can help us understand others, be they spirits, dead people, or foreigners” (p. 21). Saez emphasizes that ayahuasca is “the center of a whole practice and theory of vision”. He states:

Let us not understand this in too facile a way. One might easily fall into the temptation to take ayahuasca visions as a shortcut to explaining indigenous cosmology, making it an epiphenomenon of the drink’s pharmacological properties. Or, who knows: going further along the same path, one might make ayahuasca into a complementary visual organ that activates other perceptual potentials. Ayahuasca may be much more than this. It could, in fact, represent an equivalent to what perspective meant to European art: a way of articulating perceptions and a sense of reality (ibid.).

Therewith, for him ayahuasca becomes – and herein an affinity to Shanon’s interpretation manifests although Saez may found his interpretation on another path – an expression *sui generis* of indigene creativity which deserves more detailed attention by the researchers as is often the case.

15 One can get an idea resp. a little acoustic impression of the *hinos* on the Internet sites of www.daime.org where some recordings can be downloaded as mp3 files (<http://www.daime.org/site/pages/mes-tre/mes24set-PT.htm> – accessed: 31.5.2011).

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