Pandora’s Brew: The New Ayahuasca

March 4, 2017
Christina Callicott

Savage Minds welcomes guest blogger Christina Callicott.

I’m guessing that by now most of my readers will have heard of this stuff called “ayahuasca.” Everyone from Stephen Colbert to the New Yorker is talking about it, some in terms more cringe-inducing than others. A quick primer for those who don’t know: Ayahuasca is a psychoactive (read: psychedelic) brew developed by the peoples of the Amazon for ritual purposes ranging from ethnomedicine to divination. It’s just one in a pantheon of sacred plant and multi-plant concoctions used by Amazonian shamans, but it’s one that has sparked the fascination of peoples everywhere, from the Amazon itself to the distant corners of the urban and industrialized nations. Ayahuasca, along with other “entheogens” such as psilocybin mushrooms and LSD, is a centerpiece of the new Psychedelic Renaissance, an artistic and scientific movement which has, as one of its primary aims, the legitimization of these currently illegal substances by researching and promoting their efficacy as treatments for intractable ailments, usually psychological, including depression, end-of-life anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

Once a footnote in the annals of Jesuit missionaries and Spanish explorers, Western awareness of this mind-altering and nausea-inducing beverage grew slowly throughout the 20th century, with not a little assistance from anthropologists and ethnobotanists such as Richard Evans Schultes, the father of ethnombotany; his student, the golden-penned author Wade Davis; and the well known ethnographer-turned-shamanic evangelist, Michael Harner. In Brazil, awareness and use of the tea spread to urban areas with the development and growth of two syncretic religions that use ayahuasca as their sacrament: the União do Vegetal and the Santo Daime. Elsewhere in South America and the world, Amazonian shamans traveled to urban areas and later, to distant countries to perform healing ceremonies for growing audiences of gringos looking for emotional release, a spiritual experience, or physical healing.
Today, numerous US and European practitioners, some trained in the Amazon, some not, have taken it upon themselves to serve the brew and to conduct ceremonies. Therein lies the subject of my guest series for Savage Minds.

**Pandora’s Brew: The New Ayahuasca Part 2**

March 5, 2017
Christina Callicott

**Part 2: The New Ayahuasca Churches**

Yesterday I sat in on a webinar sponsored by ICEERS (the International Center for Ethnobotanical Education, Research and Service) and organized by anthropologist Bia Labate. Entitled “Myths and Realities about the Legality of Ayahuasca in the USA,” the webinar featured three experts on the subject. The rst was Je rey Bronfman, a leader of the União do Vegetal church in the US whose shipment of ayahuasca (the UDV calls it hoasca) was seized in 1999, leading to a protracted court battle and, eventually, a supreme court decision in favor of the church’s right to use the tea as their sacrament. The second was Rob Heffernan, member of the Santo Daime church (which also uses ayahuasca as a sacrament) and chair of its legal committee. The third was J. Hamilton Hudson, a recent graduate of the Tulane law school who has been following legal developments surrounding ayahuasca-using groups who are affiliated with neither of the aforementioned churches.

The webinar—and the series of which it is a part—are a response to the apparent confusion regarding the legal status of ayahuasca in the United States. This confusion, and some of the factors contributing to it, came to light over the past year and a half with the rise and fall of a group called Ayahuasca Healings, the self-proclaimed “rst public legal ayahuasca church in the United States.” Also known as Ayahuasca USA and Ayahuasca Healings Native American Church (AHNAC), AH is one of a number of groups who use ayahuasca in a neo-shamanic setting and, more importantly, who claim that they have the legal right to do so. Unfortunately for AH, they don’t, and a friendly letter from the DEA (U.S.) Drug Enforcement Agency) was enough to finally convince them of that fact—at least for now.
AH is one of a number of groups under the aegis of a shady organization called the Oklevueha Native American Church (ONAC), which promises its branches and branch members legal protection from controlled substances laws. ONAC rests its claims on the idea that, if such substances are used in a religious context by members of a church congregation, then that use is protected by laws such as the Religious Freedom Restoration Act, passed by congress to protect the use of peyote (which contains mescaline, a controlled substance) in the context of the Native American Church. ONAC’s claims, however, are false; thus, the churches under ONAC, which claim to serve ayahuasca legally, are acting in contradiction of the law and endangering the people they purport to serve.

In a series of blog posts this month, I’ll look at this whole story in quite a bit of depth, from the fundamental issue of why ayahuasca is (for most users) still illegal in the United States, to the rise and fall of Ayahuasca Healings and the ongoing developments in that story. I’ll also pull back for a look at the bigger picture of ONAC, its founder and the controversies therein, and the various other groups serving ayahuasca and other sacraments under ONAC’s aegis. Finally, I’ll discuss why all this activity is a kick in the teeth to the Native American Church and to the indigenous people of North America more broadly. Anthropologically speaking, one of the keys to the issue is the incongruity between attitudes toward religion and spirituality, race and ethnicity in the Amazon and in the United States—and how the superposition of an ethnomedical practice from the Amazon onto the religious structures of North America is like trying to put a square peg in a round hole.

Next time I post I’ll get started with a little more explanation of what goes into ayahuasca that makes it the concern of the DEA, and why some people in the U.S. can drink it legally while others can’t. Stay tuned

Pandora’s Brew: The New Ayahuasca Part 3

March 21, 2017
Christina Callicott

Part 3: Legality (or lack thereof)
(In the last post, I promised to start this one with some explanation of what goes into ayahuasca that makes it the concern of the US Drug Enforcement Agency, and why some people in the U.S. can drink it legally while others can't. Here goes.)

Ayahuasca is most commonly defined in the literature both lay and academic as a brew made from the combination of two plants: a vine, ayahuasca (Banisteriopsis caapi); and a leaf, usually chacruna (Psychotria viridis) but sometimes chaliponga, chagroponga or yáji (Diplopterys cabrerana). Although this definition obscures the myriad historical and contemporary iterations of brews that use the ayahuasca vine as a base, the ayahuasca-chacruna dyad is the basis for the spread of ayahuasca usage in the Amazon and around the world.

The leaves that go into the ayahuasca brew contain a substance, dimethyltryptamine or DMT, that has a number of interesting characteristics. It is produced in the healthy human body and brain, and recent research (here, here, and here) suggests that it modulates the immune system and may provide other biologically protective functions as well. DMT is also produced in numerous other plant and animal species. When extracted, purified, and smoked (or injected, as it was in a series of clinical experiments that jump-started the current wave of psychedelic research), DMT produces prodigious if short-lived hallucinations. When ingested orally, however, does nothing at all. That's because an enzyme in the human digestive system, monoamine oxidase or MAO, breaks down the DMT before it can get into the bloodstream and through the blood-brain barrier.

On the other hand, ayahuasca the vine (and subsequently the brew) contains substances that inhibit the monoamine oxidase (we call them mono-amine oxidase inhibitors, or MAOIs), thus rendering the DMT orally active and, therefore, hallucinogenic.

The legal problem arises over the fact that DMT is a Schedule 1 substance, a classification reserved for drugs that the US government defines as having no legitimate medical use and a high potential for abuse. Possession of Schedule 1 substances is illegal. Therefore, possession of ayahuasca is, ostensibly, illegal as well.

This picture is complicated by the fact that unlike most Schedule 1 substances such as LSD, marijuana, heroin, and ecstasy, ayahuasca is almost always used in a ceremonial or ritual setting with religious or spiritual overtones. These ceremonies are modeled to a greater or lesser extent on the collective ayahuasca ritual that is common among indigenous people throughout parts of the Western Amazon. Common elements include a ritual leader, often someone with special training in modulating and
interpreting the effects of the brew; the use of special ceremonial songs that are reserved for the occasion; and the circumscription of a controlled setting through the use of darkness (or conversely, light) and limits placed on participation (both who is allowed to participate, and how they are expected to act).

In the shamanic setting, as practiced in the indigenous and mestizo communities of the Amazon, the ayahuasca ceremony may be oriented toward physical, spiritual or psychological healing, it can be held for the purposes of divination, or it can be held as a sort of collective celebration. In all cases, the lack of a strict Cartesian divide between spirit and matter in indigenous culture blurs the line between religion and medicine and (more problematically in the contemporary context) between spiritual pursuits and financial ones. Within the historic Amazonian milieu, shamanic healing was often sought and provided across ethnic lines. Payment for shamanic services was akin to paying a doctor. Basic services may have been rewarded with food or a modest financial contribution. A major service such as shamanic training may have required a gift of something as expensive as a hunting rifle. In today’s internationalized and highly monetized shamanic environment, however, fees for shamanic services have become exorbitant, though the bulk of the payment is likely to go to the lodge owner and/or tour organizer, neither of whom are likely to be local people.

In addition to the shamanic use of ayahuasca, two syncretic religions have emerged in Brazil that use ayahuasca as a religious sacrament. These religions, the União do Vegetal (UDV) and the Santo Daime, combine Christianity and indigenous shamanic practice with various other elements of the rich spiritual landscape of Brazil. With their doctrines and their hierarchies of religious specialists, these religions conform more closely to the standard European conception of religion. The UDV, apparently in response to rapid growth, public visibility and the concomitant need for institutional legitimacy, has largely eliminated any practices that may be construed as medical, at least in part to avoid accusations of practicing medicine without a license. While membership in the UDV is contingent on regular payment of financial dues, tight accounting and transparency assure that dues pay only for the logistical costs of church activities—not for the sacrament, and not for the services of the religious leaders, who perform their substantial duties strictly as volunteers.

**Ayahuasca in the United States**

In the United States, there are four primary contexts for the collective consumption of ayahuasca: within the sessions of the UDV or the Santo Daime; in ceremonies conducted by a traveling South American shaman; in neo-shamanic ceremonies
conducted by a gringo who has trained in the Amazon or with a traveling shaman (or possibly not at all); and to a more limited extent, in newly formed ayahuasca churches that claim to have affiliated themselves with the Native American Church and that advertise their services on the internet.

In the US, users of ayahuasca for any purpose—religious, psycho-spiritual, medical, or recreational—have to contend with the fact that DMT is a controlled substance. The UDV came face to face with this reality the hard way, when in 1999 a shipment of hoasca addressed to Jeffrey Bronfman, a mestre (leader) in the church, was seized by the US DEA. Thanks largely to Mr. Bronfman’s deep pockets (he is an heir to the Seagrams fortune), as well as the dedication and perseverance of the US members of the UDV (they were forced to drink water rather than hoasca in their rituals for years while their case wound its way through the court system), the church took their case to the Supreme Court where, in 2006, they won the right to drink and serve hoasca legally. However, even the Supreme Court ruling did not pave the way for the UDV to import and distribute the tea: It would be three more years before the church and the DEA nalized negotiations on an agreement that requires strict record-keeping and security measures to ensure that the tea can not be diverted to non-religious use (Labate 2011). Since then, at least three Santo Daime congregations have also signed agreements with the DEA to import and distribute the tea.

A central tenet of the UDV’s argument was the precedent set by the Native American Church (NAC) for the sacramental use of peyote, as encoded in the Religious Freedom Restoration Act of 1993 (RFRA) (Bullis 2008). However, the UDV made no claims to the NAC’s exemption from the Controlled Substances Act. Rather, as the current legal framework requires, they argued their case on its own merit, as an independent bona-fide religion. Indeed, as noted above, some scholars have argued that the processes of institutionalization and legalization have driven the UDV farther from its indigenous roots (Labate 2011). Regarding the Santo Daime, both the Native American Church and the UDV cases created legislative and judicial precedents for the legalization of entheogenic sacraments, but the Santo Daime, similar to the UDV, was required to press their individual case for legalization. The Daime sacrament was not automatically legalized as a corollary of the UDV case, much less that of the Native American Church.

Several excellent articles, blog posts and webinars have already been posted on the complexities of legislation and legalization of psychoactive substances used for religious or spiritual purposes. I will provide links to several of them shortly. However, let me just summarize a few of the salient points:
• The First Amendment to the US Constitution does not categorically legitimate any and all practices that may be construed as religious. A balance must exist between public welfare and individual or community practice. Issues of sincerity are also at play.
• The Supreme Court decision and subsequent DEA agreement with the UDV permits only the UDV to use ayahuasca in their religious sessions. No other groups outside of the UDV are covered by these decisions.
• While each court ruling helps set a judicial precedent for following groups, each group or individual that seeks protection under these precedents and a subsequent exemption with the DEA must prove to the government that it is indeed a bona-fide religion, or in the case of an individual, that his or her beliefs are religious. A set of standards known as the “Meyers Criteria” are used to define what is religious and what is not. These criteria were defined in a case in which a charge for marijuana possession and intent to distribute was countered with claims for protection as a religious practice. Michael Meyers lost his case and his appeal when the court ruled that his beliefs were philosophical rather than religious.
• Even if an individual or group were to convince the government of the legitimacy and sincerity of their religious beliefs, they would have to convince the DEA of their ability to maintain control over their sacramental substance so as to preclude diversion of a controlled substance to unauthorized use. As the case of the UDV shows, these requirements can be fairly onerous and require a level of organization and a willingness to submit to DEA scrutiny that many groups, especially those associated with a countercultural movement, may not have.

The Meyers Criteria are important in a discussion of religion, shamanism and the legalization of these sacraments. The court’s job in this case was to delimit, not expand, what could be considered a religion, and it is unclear whether shamanic activity or practice would be construed as “religious.” The ve criteria, as summarized in Bullis (2008:196) are:

1. **Ultimate ideas:** They address fundamental questions about the meaning and purpose of life.
2. **Metaphysical beliefs:** These beliefs are not only fundamental, but must be transcendental.
3. **Moral and ethical systems:** Religion proposes a system or organized moral and ethical codes.
4. **Comprehensiveness of beliefs:** These beliefs are also encyclopedic and reach a broad array of issues.
5. **The accoutrements of religion:** These include a founder or prophet, sacred writings, specified gathering places, keepers of knowledge (ministers, clergy) ceremonies and ritual and holidays.

The courts sought to be inclusive in their definition of religion while avoiding an “anything goes” approach:

*Under this low-threshold “inclusion test,” the Court presumes that the following sets of beliefs are “religious”: Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Shintoism, Confucianism, and Taoism. Undoubtedly, the test also would lead to the conclusion that the beliefs of the following groups are “religious”: Hare Krishnas, Bantus, Mormons, Seventh Day Adventists, Christian Scientists, Scientologists, Branch Davidians, Unification Church Members, and Native American Church Members (whether Shamans or Ghost Dancers). More likely than not, the test also includes obscure beliefs such as Paganism, Zoroastrianism, Pantheism, Animism, Wicca, Druidism, Satanism, and Santeria. And, casting a backward glance over history, the test assuredly would have included what we now call “mythology”: Greek religion, Norse religion, and Roman religion... All of this probable inclusion leads to an obvious question: Is anything excluded? Purely personal, political, ideological, or secular beliefs probably would not satisfy enough criteria for inclusion... Examples of such beliefs are: nihilism, anarchism, pacifism, utopianism, socialism, libertarianism, Marxism, vegetism, and humanism.* (US v. Meyers, 906 F. Supp. 1494 – Dist. Court, D. Wyoming 1995:1504)

Note that the court specifically mentions shamanism in the context of the Native American Church as a religion that would likely merit inclusion under the Meyers Criteria. To my knowledge, no forms of shamanism have at this time been tested specifically against the Meyers’ Criteria. However, on April 4, 2016, Ayahuasca Healings submitted to the DEA a petition for exemption from the Controlled Substances Act. A copy of the petition was obtained through the Freedom of Information Act and has been posted [here](http://bialabate.net). Their petition is signed by Christopher [Trinity] de Guzman, the public face of AHNAC, and two other individuals whose names were withheld in the FOIA documents. The petition addresses the Meyers Criteria one by one. The ayahuasca community is waiting with bated breath for the DEA’s verdict, though many observers believe that, for various reasons, AHNAC has little chance of success.

In the next couple of posts, I’ll tell the Ayahuasca Healings story, and readers can consider for themselves what choice the DEA might make in this case.
Other resources on the complexities of entheogenic law:


“Webinar #2: Myths and Realities About the Legality of Ayahuasca in the USA.” Hosted by ICEERS and Bia Labate, featuring Jeffrey Bronfman, Rob Hernandez, and J. Hamilton Hudson. March 2, 2017. [https://youtu.be/VCwoE2Wutf4](https://youtu.be/VCwoE2Wutf4). Also, the registration page provides an overview of the webinar as well as links to some other useful resources on the subject: http://news.iceers.org/2017/02/adf_webinar_2_ayahuasca_legality_usa

**Works Cited and/or Linked**


Pandora’s Brew: The New Ayahuasca Part 4

March 26, 2017
Christina Callicott

Ayahuasca Healings

Last week (March 18, 2017), I received an email that read, in toto:

Just like I promised:
Get the free eBook here (right click, “Save Link As...’’)
I wrote this back in 2010, and the secrets contained within this
eBook, have allowed me to create and live the most beautiful,
fulfilling life I could have ever imagined.
It is actually a “channeled” book, are you familiar with what
channeling is?
Back in 2010, I met The Teachers who showed me how to
create my ideal life experience, no matter where I was at.
(The Teachers are the true authors of this eBook)
Following Their words, led me down a path more magical,
more beautiful, more filled with joy, love and freedom, than
anything I could have ever dreamt up.
Because they taught me, how to truly follow my heart. There’s
no secret, that following your heart, is
the key to creating the life of your dreams.
The question is:
How?
You know you want a life of freedom, but how do you get
there?
The mind can be so strong in it’s fears and doubts.
And we can be so controlled by other people’s expectations of us...
So the question is, above all of that, how can you still follow your heart?
This is the key to your most fulfilling life, ever.
And this eBook gives you the answers, and shows you, how you can move forward,
to create the life that your heart and soul, so deeply yearn for.
It’s time!
So enjoy this eBook, and I’ll talk to you soon! [To be continued..]
With infinite gratitude, so happy to share this,
Trinity de Guzman & The Ayahuasca Healings Family

About once or twice a week I get a missive like this from Trinity, the messianic young founder of **Ayahuasca Healings Native American Church**. Since I initiated my membership in the Ayahuasca Healings community (by reluctantly giving them my e-mail address), I have received at least 48 of these love bombs, with subject lines ranging from “Welcome Beautiful Soul” to “Day 6 – How To Choose The Right Shaman” to “…I’m going to be a father!! Yay!!”

Gayle Highpine likens Trinity’s writing to a New Age version of prosperity gospel:

> **Psychological triggers are his stock in trade. “You can manifest the life of your dreams” is powerful bait, not a religious teaching. Who wouldn’t want to live like Trinity, traveling the world skiing and surfing and having adventures? If he has any metaphysical beliefs, they appear to be “The Secret,” the New Age version of prosperity gospel, which uses the “law of attraction” and the “art of manifestation.”**

Prosperity gospel just happens to be the brand of Christianity **with which Donald Trump has aligned himself**—and one that **many Christian groups** themselves have a hard time stomaching. The **promise of wealth, power, and success** in exchange for unlimited and unquestioning faith is a powerful draw for the suffering. Someone ought to do a thesis on the parallels between Trumpism and Trinity-ism—call them legion, for like the biblical demons of the man of Gadarenes, they are many.

**A FEW PRELIMS**

In my second post of this series, I mentioned the existence of a set of organizations calling themselves branches of the Native American Church who, under the aegis of the **Oklevueha Native American Church** (ONAC), claim to be serving ayahuasca legally in the United States. I’ll be calling these groups the “new ayahuasca churches” (to distinguish them from the Santo Daime and UDV). I also characterize these groups as “neo-shamanic.” A complete unpacking of this term is beyond the scope of this discussion, so for the sake of the current argument, I’ll define “neo-shamanism” as any of a variety of novel forms of shamanic practice based on the Amazonian model but modified significantly through their adoption into a New-Age, Western, scientific-industrial cultural context. Changes generally include the elimination of tobacco smoke, the erasure of sorcery, the lack of knowledge or use of the sopla and chupa (blowing and sucking) methods of curing, the use of bottled...
ayahuasca bought on an underground market, the use of recorded and non-
Amazonian music, an ideology heavily influenced by Eastern religion and medicine,
and the appropriation and incorporation of idealized elements of indigenous and
Native North American religious culture. I’ll also recognize that neo-shamanism and
“traditional” ayahuasca shamanism represent points on a spectrum of shamanic
practice, as even “traditional” ayahuasca shamanism is adaptive and eclectic.

It’s also important to clarify up front that ONAC is an organization drenched in
controversy. They’ve been repeatedly renounced in the press and in the courts by the
National Council of Native American Churches, the governing body of legitimate
NAC organizations in North America. ONAC’s leader, James Mooney, claims
membership in a branch of the Seminole Tribe that, according to the Seminole Tribe,
doesn’t exist. Most recently, they’ve had a very public and tawdry falling out with their
own lawyer that appears to have culminated in the installment of Howard Mann,
pornography and gambling magnate, as head of ONAC. But I’m going to hold o on
the ONAC discussion for now, and lead instead with the Ayahuasca Healings story,
which brought ONAC to our attention in the first place.

ON WITH THE STORY:

Among the new ayahuasca churches, Ayahuasca Healings, also known as Ayahuasca
USA and Ayahuasca Healings Native American Church (AHNAC), is the youngest and
newest, has (or had) the biggest ambitions and the most successful marketing
operation, and as a result, gathered the attention of the press, the National Council of
Native American Churches and, finally, the U.S. federal Drug Enforcement Agency
(DEA).

Ayahuasca Healings came on the public scene in the second half of 2015. They
immediately claimed to be the rst, public, legal ayahuasca church in America, a feat
accomplished, they asserted, through their a liation with the New Haven Native
American Church. They advertised retreats both in Peru and on their 160-acre retreat
site in Elbe, Washington. The domestic retreats were o ered in exchange for a
“suggested donation” of $1497 to $1997 for a four-day retreat (Ayahuasca
Healings 2016a). Their stated mission was to build 30 retreat centers in the U.S. at
the rate of two per year until 2032, “the start of our New Golden Age” (Ayahuasca
Healings 2016b). [Note: The content of some linked webpages may have changed
since the date of research, and thus do not re ect statements made in this post. The
bibliography at the end of this post will provide original access dates, and archived
pages are available from the author upon request.]
The tone of Ayahuasca Healings’ message and mission are characteristic of the general tenor of public conversation around ayahuasca: That it’s a panacea, that it’s a step to ultimate awareness and personal empowerment, that ayahuasca will change the world:

Just like yoga and meditation have come from the East to help Westerners return back to the essential Truth of Presence & being in the heart...
Ayahuasca has come from deep within the jungles of the Amazon, for the exact same reason.
And I truly believe that Ayahuasca will be just as ‘mainstream’ as yoga & meditation are becoming…
We’re going through a massive, collective Awakening. [automated email, “Day 2: The Great Awakening & Ayahuasca”]

Ayahuasca Healings is headed by a messianic young leader named Trinity de Guzman who says that in his first ayahuasca session in 2013, “I was curled into a fetal position, crying, shaking, and vomiting. And I knew that at that moment that I was here to share [ayahuasca] with the world” (Rose 2015). Formerly an internet marketer who was making ve figures a month by the age of 19 (by his own account), De Guzman is pro led on the website Entrepreneurs for Change under the episode title, “Travel The World For Years While Your Remote Team Does All The Work” (Li 2016). After people began to look more deeply at Ayahuasca Healings, this pro le story became the focus of significant criticism, especially de Guzman’s statement that he paid his o shore employees a dollar an hour for their work, saying, “that is actually a normal, good wage in these countries where we’re hiring.”
Trinity de Guzman selfie at Macchu Picchu. Photo from profile at entreprenerusforachange.com.

De Guzman is anked by Marc “Kumooja Banyan Tree” Shackman, whose now-defunct website (http://balancingbetweenworlds.com) billed him as a “contemporary shaman, transformational life coach, inspirational guest speaker and Heart Energy Medicine therapist.” Videos released by the group (here, here and here are but a few) show a small group of young people, working and living together on their land in Elbe, celebrating, sharing food and the warmth of a re, expressing their joy at the transformations they’ve experienced through ayahuasca and the hope that they feel at being a part of this new spiritual community.

AH’s promises of love, healing and community; the charisma of their leadership and of their young and idealistic participants; and particularly the promise of legal and open ayahuasca ceremonies in the United States attracted a ready following and a signi cant amount of press coverage both in the local press and online media outlets such as Reset.me, Munchies and The Daily Beast (Rose 2015, Siegel 2015, Malandra 2016). It didn’t hurt that de Guzman has a professional background in internet marketing. In fact, Ayahuasca Healings’ ability to market themselves appears to be one of the factors leading to their downfall, when it brought them to the attention of James Mooney and the ONAC church. On Dec. 3, 2015, in two posts on its Facebook page, ONAC disavowed knowledge of New Haven NAC, under whose aegis Ayahuasca Healings purportedly was operating, and asserted that only those groups and individuals with an explicit relationship to ONAC enjoyed the legal protections they offered. In a Dec. 4 comment to one of these posts, a Facebook user posted a comment which stated (incorrectly) that only two organizations in the United States had the right to administer ayahuasca in their religious sessions: the UDV and ONAC. Following the opening comment was a piece of text entitled “Buyer Beware,” which detailed why Ayahuasca Healings was not protected. The comment appears to be signed by a “Chief Oklevueha NAC,” presumably Mooney, although my queries as to the authorship remain unanswered.
A screenshot of Inti Munay’s post to the ONAC Facebook page, with text attributed to “Chief Oklevueha NAC.”
That same day, Dec. 4, 2016, the “Buyer Beware” text appeared on the website of anthropologist Bia Labate, expert in the internationalization of ayahuasca, as an anonymous blog post (Anonymous 2015). Differences between the blog post and the Facebook comment suggest that one was not a cut-and-paste of the other. Instead, they appear to be two derivations of the same source material, making the apparent signature of “Chief Oklevueha NAC” intriguing indeed—and ironic: Did Labate begin her series of anti-AHNAC blog posts with a piece written by James Mooney, head of ONAC, or one of his proxies? What is clear is that Ayahuasca Healings had attracted Mooney’s attention—and that he was not happy with the fact that they were operating as a branch of his church without his acknowledgement and blessing. On Dec. 4 Mooney issued (via Facebook) a 2-page letter to the New Haven NAC disavowing their relationship to ONAC and demanding that Ayahuasca Healings deal directly with ONAC. Mooney closed by stating that his lawyers would be in touch with a formal cease-and-desist order, and that ONAC would notify local law enforcement of NHNAC and Ayahuasca Healings’ activities. “They will have to decide at that point whether to arrest you and those you participate with, or leave you alone.” (Council of Elders, Oklevueha Native American Church. 2015. “Letter of Distrust.” Posted to Facebook.com/OklevuehaNativeAmericanChurch/, Dec. 4. Accessed May 25, 2016.) The next day, Ayahuasca Healings announced their intention to join ONAC.

By this time, however, ayahuasca watchdogs had had enough. On Dec. 7, 2015, another post appeared on Labate’s blog, this time written by a law expert, exposing the false claims of legality offered by ONAC (Hudson 2015). The post also detailed AH’s market-oriented approach:

The [Ayahuasca Healings] website is a lead generation factory collecting email addresses. The multi-step marketing process... can have the unfortunate effect of entrapping customers in commitment-to-buy. This is Sales 101...It exploits people.

The scary thing is that so many people have bought into this in the past week that Ayahuasca USA stopped accepting applications.

Ayahuasca Healings, however, continued to move forward with their plans. On Dec. 12, they announced a formal affiliation with and blessing by James Mooney, whom de Guzman, in his enthusiasm, described as “literally no higher authority in the Native American Church in all of America” (Ayahuasca Healings 2015).

On the same day, Labate released another blog post, this one entitled...
“The ‘Legality’ of Ayahuasca Churches Under the Oklevueha Native American Church” (Highpine 2015a) examining the specifics of ayahuasca law in the US, how the UDV had gained their exemption, and why ONAC’s (and therefore AHNAC’s) claims to the legal use of entheogenic sacraments were false. On December 21, Indian Country Today published an opinion piece denouncing ONAC and the use of marijuana in Native American ceremonies—a piece that drew a swift and sharp rebuttal from Mooney (Hopkins 2015, ONAC 2015). The next day, Highpine published another blog post on Labate’s site examining the legal status of ayahuasca in the United States (Highpine 2015b). These blog posts had become a vear series targeting Ayahuasca Healings, and they managed to get the attention of some members of the public. Using the blog posts as fodder, moderators of some of the ayahuasca forums initiated conversations about the issue, and the news media, who had previously covered the story uncritically, began to look more closely at the claims and ambitions of de Guzman and ONAC (Malandra 2016).

Finally, on January 11, 2016, a Facebook group was launched called “Ayahuasca Healings Is NOT Legal.” “This group is dedicated to refuting the claims of ‘Trinity de Guzman’, James ‘Screaming Eagle’ Mooney, the ONAC, et al. in regards to illegitimate claims of their ability (and intent) to distribute ayahuasca in the state of Washington legally,” the description reads. Their first post was a link to the Dec. 12 Highpine article, “The ‘Legality’ of Ayahuasca Churches Under ONAC.” Membership of the Facebook group approached 150 people by March. However, in Elbe, things continued as planned, with the group’s first weekend retreat taking place on Jan. 22 (automated email, “Please Help”).

Towards the end of January, Trinity’s business partners in Peru sent out a press release disavowing any relationship with Ayahuasca Healings and clarifying that de Guzman’s role in their operation was as investor and booking agent, nothing more (Polley 2016). At least one more well-known retreat center in Peru later declined to do business with Ayahuasca Healings after learning of the controversy. And on January 24, a former member of the Ayahuasca Healings inner circle released a YouTube video denouncing the group on the basis of four major complaints: the lack of elders within the operation, the lack of indigenous representation, the excessive price of the retreats, and the lack of support from within the “global medicine community”—in addition to the overarching fact that they were telling people their U.S. retreats were legal, but they were not (Montgomery 2016).

The Ayahuasca Healings controversy attracted the attention of the Native American community as well. On Feb. 18, Indian Country Today published a formal statement by the National Council of Native American Churches denouncing ONAC and the
use of any sacrament other than peyote in NAC ceremonies. Although this was the same message they had issued in various amicus briefs and other memoranda in the past, this time they named ayahuasca specifically:

Some of these illegitimate organizations, comprised of non-Native people, are now claiming that marijuana, ayahuasca and other substances are part of Native American Church theology and practice. Nothing could be further from the truth. We, the National Council of Native American Churches are now stepping forward to advise the public that we do not condone the activities of these illegitimate organizations. [NCNAC 2016]

Then, sometime in the end of February, Ayahuasca Healings received a “friendly” letter from the DEA requesting that they file a formal petition for exemption under the Religious Freedom Restoration Act (automated email, “Please Help”).

On March 8, 2016, Ayahuasca Healings announced that they had made the decision to go on a “temporary hiatus,” and that they would “not be conducting ceremonies or holding retreats for a limited period of time” (automated email, “Please Help”). Their stated intention was to bring the operation into full alignment with RFRA, and yet later in the letter, they assert, “Although AHNAC has repeatedly faced criticism from detractors who believe that our interpretation of the law as it currently stands is mistaken, we are 100% certain that what we are doing here is 100% legal.”

The news of the hiatus came as a shock to those “members” who were in the process of packing for their pre-paid ayahuasca retreat in Elbe. No refunds were offered, as the money had apparently all been spent. Besides, as AH’s new representative pointed out, AH’s terms and conditions stated that monies paid would be considered a gift or an investment in the future of the church, not a fee for service (Dylan Ayahealings, Facebook comment, April 15, 2016). Participants quickly discovered that the credit card companies were treating the situation as a case of fraud and refunding payments on that basis. Meanwhile, de Guzman had been in Peru since February, and according to complaints from AH members, neither he nor Shackman were in contact with members or with the public.

As of March 8, according to the new homepage of the Ayahuasca Healings website, information on retreats would be available only to members. The first step in obtaining a membership was to provide your email address, at which time they would begin to send you one email a day for ten days. The welcome letter, which, like all missives from AH, is signed by Trinity de Guzman, reads:
Together, we are going to take a journey. The Inner Journey. The most valuable, beautiful, rewarding journey we could ever take. The emails I send you, will be like a map for you. To a treasure chest. To the peace, love, joy, and happiness you know you came here to live. A way out of being trapped by society. A way out of any depression or anxiety. And a way to let go of the deepest rooted fears that keep you stuck. So please follow these steps to make sure you receive our emails from here on. If you are using Gmail, here’s how: [automated email, “Welcome beautiful soul!”]

To be continued.

Works Cited (links without parenthetical citations will be listed, in order of appearance, at the end)


Other links:

https://ayahuascahealings.com


http://www.npr.org/2017/01/13/509558608/with-his-choice-of-inauguration-prayer-leaders-trump-shows-his-values

https://www.ncronline.org/blogs/small-c-catholic/beware-prosperity-gospel-trump-administration


https://nativeamericanchurches.org

http://www.newhavennativeamericanchurch.org

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ek0HtGxQfCo https://youtu.be/dAYl3yv4ZGk

https://youtu.be/wp5UlFyBTDw

https://www.facebook.com/groups/1019591274765819/?ref=br_rs

Pandora’s Brew: The New Ayahuasca Part 5

April 5, 2017
Christina Callicott

“The New Paradigm”
Yesterday marked exactly a year since Ayahuasca Healings submitted to the DEA their petition for exemption from the Controlled Substances Act. The cover letter, dated April 4, 2016, sets the tone for some of the backpedaling that will follow:

At the outset, petitioners wish to admit that they were previously mistaken about the current state of the law regarding Ayahuasca...This misconception has since been corrected, and Petitioners o er their sincere apologies for any prior conduct which the DEA believes might have run afoul of its regulatory agenda...[AHNAC 2016:1]

The petition process has been developed by the DEA for groups wishing to claim exemption from the Controlled Substances Act in order to practice their religion, under the standards set by the Religious Freedom Restoration Act (RFRA) and the First Amendment to the Constitution. Much of AH’s petition seeks to describe Ayahuasca Healings as a religion, and to their credit, the group’s creativity shines through. However, there are some inconsistencies, or to be more generous, selective eclecticisms, that an anthropologist might pick up on, even if the DEA doesn’t.

“Petitioners derive their religious beliefs directly from the shamanic, animist religions of the Amazon,” they write on page 4, yet in the next paragraph, they write:

Petitioners believe that the ritualistic use of Ayahuasca as a sacrament...allows those who partake in the Ayahuasca ceremonies not only a glimpse of the spirit world, but of the Great Spirit that permeates and unites all of creation...[AHNAC 2016:5]

The Great Spirit, however, is a deity of some Native North American peoples, not Amazonian. I’ve seen nothing in my studies of the myth and history of the Western Amazon, where ayahuasca shamanism has its roots, that indicates a belief in one supreme deity, other than the Christian god.

The eclecticism of course doesn’t end there. Under the heading “Belief in supernatural entities,” they list their deities: Mother Ayahuasca; Father San Pedro; Great Spirit; tens of thousands of angels as well as the archangels Rafael, Gabriel, Azrael, Raziel, and Uriel; the “Ascended Masters” Buddha and Jesus— and of course, “aside from Great Spirit, Mother Ayahuasca, and Father San Pedro, the most important supernatural entities in Petitioners’ belief system are the animistic spirits: ‘The animal spirits, plant spirits, mountain spirits, and spirits of all that exists around us...’” (AHNAC 2016:13). They claim an Amazonian lineage for the sake of legitimacy, but in keeping with other neo-shamanic movements (see my definition in post 4), their beliefs are in
fact an amalgamation of romanticized tropes from both the Amazon and Native North America with a strong dose of Eastern religion and medicine—and in this case, occult or New Age Christianity.

When it comes to clergy, however, all “Medicine Men/Women...have undergone long and extensive training with curanderos in the Amazonian jungles...” (AHNAC 2016:10). It’s not clear who led the ceremonies in Elbe, and how long or extensive their training really was. Certainly Shackman and Trinity lack the years of ascetic apprenticeship and suffering that any Amazonian shaman I know would demand of an apprentice. With regards to the retreats that Trinity ran in Peru under the AH banner, reports indicate that staff members were, at best, inexperienced. In one case:

When one of Trinity’s ayahuasca “healers” herself got sick and left, Trinity quickly promoted one of the assistant chefs to the position of “ayahuasca shaman,” [the lodge owner] said. [Capps 2016:n.p.]

Such practices would have been particularly problematic after the two indigenous shamans reportedly left halfway through the second retreat, scandalized by the behavior of Trinity and staff.

However, perhaps the biggest hurdle that AHNAC faces is proving the sincerity of their religious beliefs. Under section IIB, “Petitioners’ belief in their religion is sincerely held”:

B1. Petitioners’ religion was not created as an ad hoc justification. Petitioners did not invent their religion; they learned it from its traditional practitioners in the Amazon, and founded AHNAC in an effort to bring their religion to the United States...Petitioners herein aver that they would not, did not, and cannot imagine anyone adopting their religion merely for the sake of being able to ingest Ayahuasca legally. [AHNAC 2016:13]

Unfortunately for AH, public reports suggest the opposite. An AHNAC insider is quoted as saying “I always felt it was understood, though never mentioned, that the primary reason for calling it a religion was for legal purposes.” One retreat-goer, again in Peru, has publicly claimed more than once that Trinity is not, shall we say, a religious man:

...Trinity actually believes, “Religions are bullshit!” How do I know of this [sic], because I personally heard him say it in the common space within the Peru retreat? [sic] And I can’t argue with him in some respects, but then
**again, I’m not trying to establish a retreat in a foreign country on false pretenses on religious grounds either!** [Thomas 2016: n.p.]

While Facebook posts (like the one above) and online reviews hardly meet the burden of proof for legal or moral judgment, when it comes to the underground world of ayahuasca in Drug War countries, these sorts of fora are the community’s main way of self-policing. On the other hand, AH’s grandiose ambitions and business practices speak for themselves, and are the basis for a good deal of backpedaling and obsequiousness on the part of the Petitioners in their petition to the DEA:

Petitioners humbly acknowledge that some of the materials that have been published by AHNAC may be interpreted as ‘marketing’ efforts...Petitioners admit that they went overboard in their efforts at propagation. [AHNAC 2016:11]

The Petitioners offer to give the DEA the right of pre-publication review and authorization of any materials written or produced for the website. They insist they have decided to focus all their energies on creating a center at Elbe, and have abandoned the idea of starting numerous new centers. Later, they go even farther:

Petitioners hereby reiterate their sincere desire to be within the law and the good graces of the Government, and aver that they will modify their behavior and circumstances in whatever way DEA deems necessary for them to qualify for an exemption under RFRA... [AHNAC 2016:16]

**IN OTHER AHNAC NEWS:**

Despite their stated commitment to the Elbe site, AHNAC has given up their lease on the land which, according to **Atlas Obscura**, is being run as a mountain resort now. On August 12, 2016, Trinity announced that he would be signing a 5- or 10-year lease on property in Mexico, the new home for the Ayahuasca Healings movement. The next day he announced that he would be “finally” stepping into the role that he has been called to for so long—that of ceremonial leader. On September 2, he issued an important update via the Ayahuasca Healings website: Instead of opening up a retreat center, he would be turning the land in Mexico into a clinical research center, **to scientifically study the effects of Ayahuasca on the brain and body. This decision in the long run, will benefit and support this movement on a larger scale...The Clinical Research Center will also support everything we are doing to bring Ayahuasca to America, which ultimately is still our focus and will**
support that especially in regards to our petition for Religious Exemption from the DEA. [de Guzman 2016:n.p.]

Never mind that numerous well trained researchers on at least 3 continents have produced volumes of research on ayahuasca and its effects, much of which has already found its way into court records in support of the UDV case.

Finally, as noted in their DEA petition, AH has been (or will be?) rebranded as Heart Energy Medicine Native American Church. Information on an affiliated media company and shaman school, co-founded by Marc Shackman, can be found here and here.

AYAHUASCA: THE NEW PARADIGM

The discussion heretofore paints a picture of inconsistency, impulsivity, perhaps even immaturity—criminal behavior by no means, but neither is it the sober, intentional, and organized approach to creating a new religion that we might like to see from an individual or group who intends to take on a responsibility as great as serving ayahuasca. However, from the point of view of indigenous rights, the real kicker is not AH’s claims to an Amazonian lineage, however shallow those claims may be; it’s not their New-Age eclecticism, with which they have thoroughly modi ed this tradition (even the “purest” Amazonian shamanism is eclectic by nature); the real kicker is the fact that Trinity and the rest don’t even plan to practice Amazonian shamanism. They have a “New Paradigm” that they are bringing to the Western world that improves on the old Amazonian methods and structures. Their new paradigm leaves indigenous shamanism behind completely, to replace it–and its practitioners–with a new and improved version.

Trinity first shares his vision that ayahuasca is meant to save the Western world from itself:

I’ve been shown by Mother Ayahuasca, there is a new way of bringing Her to the world, that is needed to help us through our modern-day way of thinking, and our current problems and challenges in the world...So, what I will be sharing with you, is what’s been taught to me as the “New Paradigm of Ayahuasca”. And it is how to share this medicine in the best way, for our modern day problems and consciousness...

The Old Paradigm Vs. The New Paradigm of Ayahuasca
The Old Paradigm of Ayahuasca, which is how the medicine has been shared for thousands of years, is very earthy, masculine, and dense. It’s very much about physical healing, and going into the shadows of our consciousness, into the dark, scary places, to heal what we need to. It’s difficult, challenging, intense, purgative, and yes, very powerful. This is the way the jungle shamans, the Shipibo, and many other tribes, have worked with Ayahuasca in the Amazon, since its inception as a medicine. This is the tradition of the medicine – its roots...And I give SO much thanks, gratitude, respect, and reverence for how this way of working with the medicine, has brought us to our current level of consciousness. But we need a new way of working with the medicine, to take us to higher states of consciousness. To the next level in our collective evolution This is where the New Paradigm of Ayahuasca comes in. The New Paradigm is all about love, light, the Angels and Archangels, the Ascended Masters, Sacred Fires, and through our joy, through love, through the heart, illuminating, cleansing, and purifying what no longer serves. It’s about the Feminine energy, the Divine Mother, and about healing through an enjoyable, blissful, heart-opening experience. It’s about the gentle, soft, loving compassion and grace of a child in its Mother’s arms. It’s about healing through an experience that is so much more easy and enjoyable. [de Guzman n.d.a.:n.p.]

Thanks, old man. I’ll take it from here.

From the point of view of indigenous cultural and intellectual property rights, AH’s “New Paradigm” represents a complete divestment and dispossession of indigenous culture from its proper owners. This attitude is beyond cultural appropriation; it’s more like cultural expropriation.

The thing is, this attitude is rampant throughout the neo-shamanic scene –Trinity is just the only one bold enough and rude enough to say it out loud, much less to publish it on his website. Anti-indigenous attitudes and the re-shaping of ayahuasca practice are common: The old guys in the jungle don’t sing pretty, they’re always smoking tobacco, they hit on the girls. Yes, this is true. They do all this. But does that give a bunch of entitled gringos (“Travel the world for years while your remote team does all the work!”) the right to avail themselves of a hard-fought, hard-won cultural birthright? Not according to this anthropologist it doesn’t.

Culture, especially indigenous culture, is not an unlimited resource ripe for exploitation. It is not the product of unbridled creativity, as is culture in the West. It is the product of generations of very close interaction with a particular environment. By interaction, I’m not talking skiing, surfing or rock climbing. I’m talking about getting
out several days a week to walk the hunting trails, or till the soil and pull the weeds in
the garden, so that your children don’t starve—and doing that year in and year out for
your entire life. I’m talking about giving up everything from food to sex in order to
purify and prepare your body in the search for toxic plants with which to treat the
children’s intestinal parasites, exacerbated by overcrowding in state- or mission-
sponsored population centers—or in the search for medicines with which to treat the
latest European-induced epidemic disease.

Indigenous culture is not an unlimited resource; it is not the product of unbridled
creativity. It is the product of very close interactions within a small group of people—
the extended family. Amazonian shamanism is driven by the quest to keep the family,
especially the tender children, alive, happy, and functional. The quest is supported by
a very specific cultural, economic and intellectual milieu, in which the community has
enough resources for one of its members to withdraw temporarily from productive
activities in order to learn how to suffer on behalf of his or her people. Amazonian
shamanism as we know it today is a response to centuries of colonial violence; to the
mass genocide of the population through warfare, slavery and disease; to the loss of
knowledge that accompanied the deaths of knowledgeable elders. Amazonian
shamanism as we know it today is a survival strategy for dealing with an extremely di-
cult physical environment and an extremely difficult and rapidly changing socio-
political environment. Just because they’ve chosen to share it with you doesn’t mean
it’s yours for the taking.

Indigenous culture is not an unlimited resource—especially when it relies so heavily on
specific forms of biodiversity, as does Amazonian shamanism. The exploding gringo
demand for ayahuasca, both in the tourist centers of the Amazon and the export
markets of the North, is driving up the price of the vine, which in turn is driving the
overharvesting of the vine in the wild. B. caapi can be, and is often, grown in
cultivation, but currently not in quantities equal to the demand. This situation
threatens to deprive the Amazonian people of access to a core cultural commodity.
Access to genetic resources (i.e. plants) is a matter for international scrutiny and
negotiations—though in this case, the existing treaties are insufficient to the task at
hand.

One of the bright lights of the ayahuasca tourism boom has, up to now, been its
corollary effect of stimulating interest in traditional culture among young Amazonians.
The destitute poverty in which shamans had, previously, been confined by their
profession was one of the factors driving young people away from the apprenticeship
process (the asceticism of apprenticeship is apparently the other major deterrent).
However, with tourism came relative affluence, greater prestige, and growing
interest among young people (Proctor 2000). Now, gringo- owned and operated
retreat centers have relegated indigenous shamans to the position of hired help, and
increasingly, gringo shamans replace indigenous ones altogether. Trinity explains
why:

Let me tell you a story.

In the past, for previous Ayahuasca retreats that we would run, we brought the
Shipibo, the old traditional jungle shamans, to lead our ceremonies.

Why?
Because I knew that many people who are looking into the medicine, wanted that.

So I would bring these jungle shamans to lead our ceremonies, even though I
honestly didn’t really like the way those ceremonies were led that much. They
didn’t resonate with me, since I’ve sat with other people who’ve lead ceremony,
that were so much more powerful for me than any Shipibo ceremony I’ve been in.

I realized, I can not do that...

So, I’ll say it clearly, from now on, the Shamans that I have leading our ceremonies
will not be the jungle shamans that many of you think you want.

Why? Because there is a new way of working with the medicine, that is MORE
powerful.

And most importantly, more ENJOYABLE.

Why would you su er through a di cult ceremony if you don’t have to? If you can
have the same depth, or even deeper level of transformation, from a ceremony
that is so much more peaceful and enjoyable.

The fact is, you don’t have to do it the old way anymore. The dark, dense,
masculine, di cult, purgative experience in the shadows... Experiencing Ayahuasca
does NOT have to be like that.

And I can no longer invite you to come to a ceremony led by a jungle shaman,
because it is just not in integrity for me to do so. [de Guzman n.d.:n.p.]

It’s all about the new paradigm, baby. It’s all about feeling good.
NO, WE ARE NOT ALL NATIVE AMERICAN.

If AHNAC really wanted to convince the DEA of the sincerity of their beliefs and of the legitimacy of their connection to indigenous religion, such public statements are not the best way to go about it. Neither is

Marc Shackman’s statement to Atlas Obscura regarding the (legitimate) Native American Church’s rejection of their activities: “‘What we really are is an indigenous world culture church,’ Shackman says. ‘We fall under Native American church because we’re in America and that’s the indigenous culture in America.’” No matter that neither Shackman nor Trinity are native, or American. Shackman is from England, and Trinity is a Canadian of Filipino descent.

Atlas Obscura writes:

Native American Churches who reject groups like Ayahuasca Healings, [Shackman] says, are “not in touch with their traditional religion,” which he believes would not see a separation here.

“We do not expect all native peoples to approach us with such a transcendental perspective, and view us all as one spirit. There are always a few haters,” he says. “You can’t make everyone happy.”

As Trinity described in his “New Paradigm” of ayahuasca, these non-indigenous people think they can do “indigenous” better than the real Natives.

I’m at a loss for words.

Next stop: ONAC

Citations and links (in order of appearance)


Pandora’s Brew: The New Ayahuasca Part 6

April 7, 2017
Christina Callicott

Oklevueha Native American Church

In addition to the widespread appropriation of Native North American culture that characterizes neo-shamanic discourse, the current spate of ayahuasca churches in the U.S. adds insult to injury by claiming that their practices are legal because they are official branches of the Native American Church, specifically the Oklevueha Native American Church (ONAC), led by James Mooney. At least four churches and one retreat center have been established under the ONAC aegis focusing specifically on ayahuasca (though they may offer other services and products as well including herbal elixirs, cuddle parties and the ceremonial use of Life Frequencies Essentials and Chakra Tools computer software). These churches falsely claim to be offering legal ayahuasca ceremonies in the United States. Membership in these churches is
available to the public for a fee, and in keeping with the common framework of Amazonian shamanic tourism, they charge a second (usually much higher) fee for ceremonial services.

DEATH IN KENTUCKY

At least one of these churches was the site of a death associated with a ceremony, apparently an ayahuasca ceremony. Lindsay Poole, 33, became unresponsive when she fell during a nighttime ceremony with the Oklevueha Native American Church of the Peaceful Mountain Way (PMW) in Berea, Kentucky. Ceremonies were held in a store-front building, “almost on Main Street,” said Madison County coroner Jimmy Cornelison. When police arrived, they found Poole dead. Mr. Cornelison is unable to release an autopsy report because the case is under investigation by federal authorities. He says there’s a possibility that someone could be charged with criminal offense in the death, if the feds rule that the use of ayahuasca was in fact illegal, constituting trafficking in a controlled substance.

Although Mr. Cornelison says that the group is no longer operating out of their store front, they are apparently still offering ayahuasca ceremonies in Kentucky. Signing up for one is as simple as adding a date to your online shopping cart and checking out with PayPal. Another ayahuasca church operating in Kentucky, AyaQuest, has suggested that the PMW leaders were inexperienced and shouldn’t have been leading ceremonies:

_I remember conducting [PMW’s leaders’] rst journey and I was pleased to meet them. They left Aya Quest in October 2015 to start their own Church, I was concerned they were not ready, but it was theirs to do and I wont go into details here...In my humble opinion I feel they should suspend ceremonies until the investigation is complete but I don’t see that re ected on their website and I nd that troubling._

At least one former participant felt the same way.

_I found the ceremony leader...to lack deep enough energy work ability to adequately handle the full breath [breath?] of spirit energies that potentially open up in Aya sessions. He has some education in Psychology (BA major) and relies on the verbiage of the profession to speak during the process but I experienced his actually ability to hold the energy during the sessions and to work with and e ectively help and release energies to be_
limited and, in some cases, inadequate. I suggest if one wishes deep and safe help during an Ayahuasca ceremony to seek help from a true experienced Shaman. I do not recommend this place or this leader.

Other participants offer glowing recommendations, however.

The point that I would like my readers to consider is not whether the individuals leading the ceremony in question were adequate to the task or not. The question is: Can the DEA effectively regulate this issue? How? Is it the role of the DEA to decide who is prepared and qualified to safely lead an ayahuasca ceremony, in which strong physical reactions often go hand in hand with overwhelming spiritual and emotional experiences? This is a matter for debate and disagreement even among indigenous and mestizo shamans in the Amazon—can we really expect the U.S. federal government to be able to solve the problem? The current framework of legalization, based on gaining an exemption from the DEA, simply does not address this issue adequately. Nor can it. Nor should it. We need another system.

Although Mr. Cornelison—and likely the local and federal police—seem clear that the church activities are illegal, the press is less convinced. At least two outlets (WLKY and WKYT) claim that the state of Kentucky allows registered members of the Native American Church to use ayahuasca legally. Their failure to discern the truth propagates continued misunderstandings.

Furthermore, the Lexington Herald Leader stated that the death occurred in conjunction with a Native American Church ceremony—failing to distinguish between the ONAC branches and the legitimate Native American Churches of North America. Such statements reflect poorly on the legitimate and long-standing Native American Churches.

NEO-SHAMANISM AND THE (REAL) NATIVE AMERICAN CHURCH

By attempting to forge themselves a pathway toward legitimacy and legality in the US, these ayahuasca churches have taken a square peg—Amazonian shamanism—and tried to force it into the round hole of Native American Church practice. In doing so they have opened themselves to a host of criticisms and challenges. For one thing, the Native American Church was founded to protect the ceremonial use of peyote and the spiritual path that developed around it—not marijuana, not ayahuasca. ONAC’s campaign to legalize marijuana and other entheogens as sacraments of the Native American Church has aroused the ire of the National Council of Native American Churches, who have participated in lawsuits against the Mooneys and
ONAC and who have vigorously and vociferously denounced any association with James Mooney and family, with ONAC and its branch churches, and with the use of anything other than peyote in the ceremonies of the Native American Church (Brief of Amici Curiae the National Council of Native American Churches et al., Mooney v. Holder, No. 14-15143. (US 9th Cir. Court of Appeals, July 25; NACNA 2016).

Furthermore, the commodification of spirituality is anathema to Native North American people. Whereas payment for shamanic services in the Amazon is standard practice, to Native North American people, payment for a religious ceremony or for membership in a church is unacceptable (“AIM resolution, May 11, 1984” and “Resolution of the 5th Annual Meeting of the Traditional Elders Circle, October 5, 1980,” quoted in Churchill 2003). And yet, that is the model that ONAC and ONAC-affiliated churches have adopted in order to promulgate their claims—and all their coffers.

OKLEVUEHA NATIVE AMERICAN CHURCH

The Oklevueha Native American Church is headed by James Warren “Flaming Eagle” Mooney, who claims to be a member of the Oklevueha band of Seminole Indians and a descendant of the Seminole leader Billy Osceola Powell (ONAC 2016). His Seminole membership, however, has been denied by the Seminole Tribe of Florida (Brown 2016). Mooney’s son, Michael, heads his own church, formerly affiliated with ONAC, called the Native American Church of Hawaii, which uses cannabis as a substitute for peyote in their ceremonies. In 2014, Michael Mooney and ONAC-Hawaii lost a case in the 9th Circuit Court of Appeals that sought legal status for their use of cannabis. The Mooneys have been granted one victory, however, and that was for the sacramental use of peyote by non-Native Americans in the state of Utah, as long as they are members of the Native American Church and are using peyote in “bona de religious ceremonies” (State of Utah v. Mooney, No. 20010787 (Supreme Court Utah June 22, 2004)).

Despite the limited scope of this ruling, not to mention other court losses and the ongoing arrest and prosecution of ONAC members for possession of marijuana and other activities (Agar 2015; State of Ariz. v. Tracy Elise, No. CR2013-001555-007 DT (Superior Ct. Ariz. Maricopa Cty. March 2, 2016)), ONAC promises its members...
and affiliated branches wide protection from prosecution under the law. Among other so-called “rights,” ONAC membership:

provides you a means to receive your constitutional rights in attending earth based indigenous American native spiritually empowering and healing ceremonies - especially Native American Church indigenous ceremonies that involve sacraments (peyote, cannabis, ayahuasca, etc.) that are otherwise illegal for Non-Members to partake and or be in possession of. [ONAC 2015a]

Some ONAC affiliates go farther than that. ONAC of Soma Veda (ONACS), based in Florida, offers its members the ability to practice alternative medical therapies without a license, or to practice beyond the scope of their training:

If you practice any form of alternative, complimentary and or spiritually based healing work and either do not have a license and or are practicing outside your mandated scope of practice you are at risk! In order to continue your ability to practice Spiritually and or Energetically based [therapies], you will need to become an active Member of ONACS according to your authorized scope of practice. [ONACS 2016]
The ONAC version of evangelism—or what the DEA petition process calls “efforts at propagation”—looks and reads more like a multilevel marketing scheme than a growing religious movement. The ONAC- Soma Veda website reads:

**In consideration of How to Start Oklevueha NACS Independent branch, ask yourself:**

- Was your healing and natural medicine training apprentice style?
- Was your training in Native American and or Indigenous Medicine?
- Do you have a current license but are having issues with your full scope of practice?...
- Are you concerned about mandatory Vaccination issues for yourself or your children?
- Have you been hiding your healing work? Keeping it on the “Down Low”, avoiding marketing or advertising because of fear?...
- Do you host Ceremony, Sacrament, Purification Lodges or other Native and or Indigenous practices at your home or property?

If any of the above is true...

Well, you should know the answer by now! We can help you! Time to step into the light!

Membership in ONAC-affiliated churches is available for a fee, with substantial discounts for military veterans. ONAC-Soma Veda charges $100 for a membership at the basic level; ONAC itself charges $200. In addition, both ONAC and ONAC-Soma Veda offer the right to establish independent branches under their leadership; ONAC-Soma Veda charges $7500 to do so. It is probable that other branches offer the same right; Mooney recently repudiated New Haven NAC for establishing Ayahuasca Healings as an independent branch without his approval. Unfortunately, many details of the hierarchy, structure and finances of ONAC’s operation remain obscure. However, Mooney estimates that 300 churches operate under ONAC auspices (Brown 2016; Capps 2016). According to Mooney himself, membership has grown from 2000 in 2014 to 20,000 in 2016—a tenfold increase in a year and a half (Capps 2016).

The growth is driven by Mooney’s contentious claim that ONAC membership is a “bulletproof” means of subverting federal drug law:
"We don't have the money to hire your attorneys, but we have the information to tell your attorneys that's bulletproof and will get you off," Mooney said. "We've got them by the short hairs, and it's a matter of time before it's all clean and clear...Once this gets out, it's going to explode," Mooney says, "it's ipping going to explode." (Capps 2016)

Apparently, not everyone agrees that an ONAC membership card is a “bulletproof” way to foil the cops—including ONAC’s own former attorney, Matthew Pappas. In the course of a very tawdry falling out with the church full of accusations and counter-accusations, Pappas released a letter to the public detailing his departure—he says, resignation—from the church. While crisscrossing the country to help defend ONAC-affiliated arrestees, Pappas became aware of Mooney’s “bulletproof” claim.

As we began helping people around the country who had been charged with crimes or had their sacraments taken by police or local authorities, I learned that James had been telling people they were “bulletproof” from law enforcement and had nothing to worry about when introducing them to ONAC and “gifting” branches while money was paid to him under the proverbial table. More and more people reported they were angry that they’d been promised that they were protected from the law yet had been arrested and lost thousands and thousands of dollars they had put in on a sincere and religious basis because of representations made by James Mooney.” (Pappas 2016:2-3)

Pappas began to feel that Mooney’s interest in money was inappropriate, and that many of his actions put the church and its members in danger. He drew up an agreement for Mooney and other church leaders to sign, and presented it to the president and chief operating officer of the church, who in turn took it to Mooney.

The agreement I had proposed required that anyone out talking to potential branch leaders about new branches of the church could not make representations that church membership led to being “bulletproof” from arrest, attacks and seizures by the government. It did not affect anything spiritual - it required representations about the law not be made to make it seem the church totally protected people without any risk. The agreement also required that ONAC leaders have any representations that were being made regarding legal protections be rst approved in writing by legal counsel. Finally, the agreement required that people seeking to start branches be subject to a background check as well as a spirituality evaluation. Another issue I had discovered was that some branch leaders had
questionable backgrounds that should have been considered so as not to cause risk for other members and branches of the church. (Pappas 2016:4-5)

Based on Mooney’s refusal to sign the agreement, Pappas resigned. In the fracas, Howard Mann was made the new president of ONAC. According to various sources (here, here, and here, though two of these sources may be the same author), Mann deals in online gambling and pornography. His newest venture, according to Pappas, is commercial marijuana.

Tomorrow (hopefully) I will finalize this series with a discussion. Stay tuned.

Citations and links (in order of appearance)


Pandora’s Brew: The New Ayahuasca Part 7

April 17, 2017
Christina Callicott

Conclusion: It’s all fun and games...

As I mentioned in the first post of my series, anthropologists and ethnobiologists have played an outsized role in studying and popularizing ayahuasca and Amazonian shamanism, and more recently, attending to its internationalization. This history affords anthropologists a stake in discussions of drug policy issues pertaining to the subjects; one might even suggest it requires their participation as a matter of ethical concern. One topic of interest among scholars and activists right now is whether and how to regulate ayahuasca practices within a framework of increasing legalization and
legitimation in the global north. Some scientists and activists seem to believe that legality alone will bring increased transparency and safety by eliminating the need for practitioners and participants to navigate in what is effectively a criminal underground. However, the assumption of legality among the practitioners and participants of the new ayahuasca churches, particularly Ayahuasca Healings, sheds light on numerous other problems that legalization alone will not solve—in fact, may exacerbate. These include the misappropriation of indigenous culture, the hyper-commodification of spirituality, and a rapid increase in demand for the vine, which is already being overharvested in some areas.

As we saw in post #6, a major issue that arises in the face of legalization is how to ensure the physical and psychological safety of participants and the qualifications of practitioners—an issue which remains problematic even in the Amazon. How would ayahuasca practice be regulated and policed if it were legalized in North America—or should it be? Scholars and researchers are beginning to discuss options for such a scenario (Blainey 2015; Haden et al. 2016). However, given the privileged role of religion in U.S. culture and the lack of regulatory oversight of religious organizations and their leadership, even in the face of some of the nefarious practices associated with religion in our country, it is questionable whether legalization under the rubric of religious freedom will provide for the safety and wellbeing of participants—especially given the rise of these new ayahuasca churches, their often young and inexperienced leaders, and the DEA’s lack of regulatory powers with regard to the level of training and experience of “ministers” or “clergy.”

Contributing to this issue is the lack of discernment engendered by anything-goes New-Age eclecticism and the emotional neediness—and therefore, vulnerability—of a population scarred by the excesses and violence of modernity. Such a population is easy prey for a charismatic leader promising transformation, awakening, and freedom. While such leaders, and the dangers they represent, are not con ned to ayahuasca shamanism, it may be that ayahuasca use exacerbates the problem. Despite the common wisdom that ayahuasca “dissolves the ego,” the very opposite may be true. One gringo shaman that I know calls it “the ego explosion.” “We warn people about it when they come to visit our center,” he said. The UDV has systems of accountability in place that help keep a lid on excessive egotism and ensure acceptable behavior from leaders and members. Traditionally, the egalitarian social structure of Amazonian culture has performed the same function. However, with the expropriation of ayahuasca use to new cultural settings, particularly the Western world where personal freedom and individuality are cherished above all, social controls over individual transgressions are in short supply. Thus the privileged position of religious freedom in U.S. culture, along with the premium placed on
individual freedom, are a recipe for danger when it comes to the legalization of ayahuasca within the current framework.

It's all fun and games until someone gets hurt. The movie “Enlighten Us: The Rise and Fall of James Arthur Ray” is another cautionary tale about the promises and perils of New Age spirituality, the quest for personal transformation, the vulnerability of the suffering, and the dangers of runaway charisma.

Whether or not Ayahuasca Healings succeeds in winning their DEA exemption—and most observers believe that they won’t—the controversy has exposed the ongoing rift between the neo-shamanism community in the United States, which invariably lays claim to romanticized images of Native American and indigenous Amazonian spirituality and worldviews, and various sectors of the Native American community, in this case, the Native American Church. It is a humorless irony that the new ayahuasca churches purportedly idolize and seek to mimic those very Native American peoples who have consistently denounced such misappropriation of Native American spirituality and culture, and who have so consistently and vehemently distanced themselves from James Mooney and ONAC.

The disjuncture is not just between New Age and Native American spirituality, but also between Amazonian and Native North American forms of shamanic and religious practice, colonial histories and socioeconomic settings. Contemporary ayahuasca shamanism evolved in a context of interethnic travel and trade. Shamanic power in the Amazon relies on the ability to live, act, communicate, and negotiate across the boundaries between various groups of humans, between human and non-human, and between material and spiritual worlds. Kinship and personhood among indigenous Amazonians are based more on relations of nurturance and reciprocity than on genetic speciation. Jaguars, for example, may be considered people, even kin, whereas members of other tribes may be considered not fully human. Within the eld of genetically human relationships, where the social structure is based on colonial ethnic hierarchies, the use of ayahuasca is used variously to index ethnic distinctions, to subvert them, and to blur them in the process of interethnic alliance building. Ethnicity in the Amazon tends to be fluid. This cosmopolitanism, the cross-boundary exchange and multi-ethnic eclecticism that characterizes Amazonian shamanism has made it a good t for an international audience. Furthermore, due to the interethnic nature of Amazonian shamanism, services have historically been rendered for a fee. This practice was readily expanded to incorporate the current wave of seekers to the Amazon.

In North America, however, ayahuasca shamanism has been juxtaposed onto an indigenous context that is completely anathema to the commodification of anything
spiritual, and in which ethnicity is far from fluid. In Native North America, ethnic identity is measured by blood quotient and by registration in a federally recognized tribe, and identity politics are a serious issue with very real ramifications for tribal membership and access to the benefits that it affords. Furthermore, New Age appropriation of indigenous spirituality has been a sore spot for Native American people for decades, and even inter-tribal appropriation (e.g. the Sun Dance and sweat lodge ceremonies), as well as the sale of native spirituality by indigenous people to outsiders, have led to bitter acrimony within the Native North American community (Churchill 2003).

Equally salient are the different religious and colonial contexts that predate contemporary indigenous spirituality in North and South America. Ayahuasca shamanism developed largely within the socio-cultural and economic context of Jesuit missionization, which was relatively tolerant of shamanic practice, even incorporating it into the Jesuit system of indirect governance. Similarly, Amazonian healers often eagerly adopted the symbols and imagery of their powerful Christian counterparts. Some scholars claim that the ayahuasca ceremony itself is a hybrid form born within the missions that later spread to the hinterlands (Gow 1994). To the contrary, Native North American peoples still remember vividly the missionary boarding schools to which their grandparents were abducted, where they were violently stripped of their families, their languages, and their cultures. They also remember vividly the centuries of persecution that they suffered for the practice of their religions. The passage of the American Indian Religious Freedom Act and the Religious Freedom Restoration Act have only begun to repair this damage, and yet it is these hard-fought and long-suffered victories to which proponents of New-Age indigeneity now lay claim.

One level, the Ayahuasca Healings story is just one example of many in which non-indigenous people seek to appropriate indigenous culture and in so doing, colonize the territory of the spirit in the same way we have colonized their lands. On another level, the Ayahuasca Healings story is one of youth, idealism, and naiveté, coupled with a millennial culture of narcissism, self-promotion and entrepreneurialism, in famed by the runaway egotism that appears to be a possible side-effect of frequent ayahuasca use. On all levels, however, the story is a cautionary tale about the practical, ideological, and ethical problems that confront the legalization of ayahuasca, problems that the current framework, based on a religious-freedom exemption, fails to address.
Author's note: Thanks to Jade Grigori for help with wording. Also thanks to the editors and April guest blogger of Savage Minds for allowing me to overstay my welcome and continue posting until the story was complete.

Works Cited:


(*) Original links:


Part 2 (March 5, 2017): https://savageminds.org/2017/03/05/pandoras-brew-the-new-ayahuasca-2/


