



Accidental Environmentalism: Nature and Cultivated Affect in European Neoshamanic Ayahuasca Consumption

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ABSTRACT

Existing research demonstrates a positive connection between psychedelics and increased nature relatedness. Enhanced affective ties toward nature are widely framed as being built into the pharmakon itself, and the relevance of experiences remains little understood. This paper turns to neoshamanic ayahuasca ceremonies in Europe, exploring the way specialists and attendants refer to nature in speech and performance. I argue that ritual framings performed during these ceremonies provide fertile ground for affective ties to emerge through substance-induced experiences. I trace such framings by exploring how medicine and healers are being coded; how specific materialities are rendered meaningful; and how individual experiences are discussed at such retreats. I argue that even while participants prioritize individual healing, personal development, or the satisfaction of psychonautical curiosity, environmentalism appears to be anchored by the proceedings themselves. Thus, this paper opens up for analysis ceremonial substance use as a contact zone where coherence is produced intersubjectively.

KEYWORDS: nature relatedness, ayahuasca, neoshamanism, ritual, Europe

It is noon on Saturday, and time to rest between two nocturnal sessions. A few of us have taken to the woods to stretch our legs and take in fresh air on this bright autumn day. As we walk through the forest close to the retreat

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center, conversations flare up. Most of us only met yesterday, shortly before the first session commenced, and spent the night in quietude as is the norm in European neoshamanic ayahuasca ceremonies. Now out in the bright sunlight, people engage in lively descriptions of what they went through last night and how they situate the brew and ceremonies in their lives. The group is a typical mix: slightly more men than women; predominantly white middle class backgrounds. One is drinking for the first time, but most have been to this center a few times already, accommodating regular ayahuasca consumption within ordinary lives of teachers, nurses, executives, or entrepreneurs. The reasons why people joined are typical too. Most attend to seek healing for specific ailments or addictions. Others consider this an exercise in personal growth, framed in the language of spirituality. Still others are here to satisfy their curiosity about psychedelics.

As we walk deeper into the forest, people express awe and praise the power of this concoction. But despite referring to growth, connections, and development, none of my interlocutors this afternoon refer directly to changes in environmental attitudes. If asked, however, all confirm enthusiastically how drinking the brew and sitting in these sessions have changed how they relate to nature. My companions tell me that connections have deepened and consumption patterns turned more environmentally conscious since they came into contact with this “plant medicine.”

This paper contributes to an emerging scholarship on the positive relation between the consumption of psychedelic substances and environmentalism. So far, the evidence is anecdotal, and how the two hang together is not well understood. Quantitative and qualitative data gathered in clinical trials and online questionnaires suggest a trend to take on more liberal worldviews and an increase in nature connection following the use of psychedelic substances (Forstmann and Sagioglou 2017; Carhart-Harris et al. 2018; Lyons and Carhart-Harris 2018). Nothing about this is entirely new, and it echoes the folklore of the Dope decade (Elcock 2020). The accidental inventor of LSD and subsequent hero of the psychedelic movement, Albert Hoffmann, contemplated toward the end of his life that “alienation from nature” was “the causative reason for ecological devastation and climate change” (Hofmann 2013, 102), with psychedelics being “catalyzers” to recalibrate humans toward nature (also see Ott 1994, 88–89; Luna 2018).

In exploring the transformative potential of psychedelic substances, proponents emphasize the agency of “master plants” (Adelaars and Rättsch 2016), and clinical researchers prioritize the workings of molecular compounds in the brain or internal experiences unfolding within the theater of the psyche (Langlitz 2013; Hartogsohn 2020). The performative dynamics of interactions, and thus the practice-based, substance-enhanced worlding occurring in laboratories, chambers, or in neoshamanic ritual spaces are little understood. Set

(denoting individualized expectations, intentions, and feeling) and setting (denoting the material and cultural environment) are critical parameters of psychedelic inquiry and therapy. Yet, the ceremonial usage of ayahuasca, for instance, lays bare a middle ground stretching between the poles of the individual and a rather abstract sociomaterial environment. As instantiations of collective substance consumption that are ritualized rather rigidly and are guided by more or less well-trained ritual specialists, ceremonies can be viewed, I suggest, as contact zones between diverse sets of people and between people and plants that carry the potential of transforming ways of relating to the world.

This paper adds to the growing research on ayahuasca, on one hand, and nature relatedness and psychedelic substances on the other by exploring how nature is related to and affectively loaded within the context of underground ceremonial ayahuasca usage in Europe. Taking enthusiastic statements about reframed nature connections as a starting point, I explore their making through substance-based ritual sessions. Without necessarily intending to do so and without much notice, ceremonial ayahuasca usage tends to shift environmental relations. I call this “accidental environmentalism.” I argue that such ceremonies involve what I call the “ritual framing of experiences.” I demonstrate that in striving to produce some form of coherence amid challenging psychedelic experiences and oftentimes rocky trajectories of healing or personal development, nature is related to in specific, affectively loaded terms. Thus, this paper addresses the productivity of rituals, as well as their ability to raise worlds and to bring about change at the juncture of structure and performance, practice, and text. I turn to rituals as bounded temporal and spatial units involving more or less orchestrated bodies, gestures, and utterances, exploring how they articulate and recursively engrain affectionate forms of relating to nature.

This paper draws on participant observation at more than ten weekend-long underground retreats, consisting of two or three ritual drinking sessions each embedded into a ceremonial structure.¹ Most ceremonies took place in the countryside around Berlin between 2018 and 2020, plus one in rural North Germany and one in the rural Netherlands. All can be classified as neoshamanic practice. Headed mostly by healers indigenous to the Amazon, assisted by European retreat facilitators and assistants, all set-ups considered here featured a considerable degree of experimentation while emphasizing the traditional quality of the proceedings.² I participated in all but one set-up repeatedly. Furthermore, set-ups do overlap as participants regularly join ceremonies organized by more than one group, swap stories, and even stand in teacher–disciple relations with one another. Given these relations and the necessarily secretive approaches in the context of illegality, I trace a rather closely entangled, contingent formation.

The evidence brought forward here is—in medical terms—suggestive only. My study draws on comparatively small samples without control groups, the mean number of attendees of individual retreats amounting to forty.

Furthermore, I was not able to observe or interview participants before they became involved in ceremonial ayahuasca usage, nor does the design of the study allow for in-depth observation of everyday practices of drinkers beyond retreat contexts. I ground my elaborations on long-term transformations of subjective self-assessments for better or worse. I gathered most self-assessments from regular participants. This has a methodological dimension, as meeting one another during repeat ceremonies hones familiarity and trust, and my interest in long-term transformations oriented me naturally to regular participants.

Specific forms of relating to nature appear to be at the heart of contemporary neoshamanic practice in general and ayahuasca ceremonies in particular (Fernández 2014; Gearin 2015). Marketing campaigns and testimonies uniformly emphasize the naturalness of the medicine and introduce healers in a language strongly infused with exoticizing imageries of the romantic “Noble Savage” (Raymond 2007). The medicine is said to have been used since time immemorial,³ and the propensities to heal by Amazonian shamans is pitched to stem from proximity to nature (Fernández 2014). Alex Gearin has explored moments of cultural critique at play in very similar contexts in Australia, demonstrating that a sense of loss of nature connection is at the heart of diagnosing individual or social ills in such circles (Gearin 2016). Building thereupon, I note a certain circularity in my findings. Not only does ceremonial usage anchor what I call “accidental environmentalism,” but it can also be argued that only persons geared toward alternative forms of healing and a somewhat appreciative sense of nature make it to these ceremonies. These are joined, of course, by rather desperate people looking back on long trajectories of health-seeking behavior, and so-called psychonauts (Schmid, Jungaberle, and Verres 2010). At the very least, I contend, ceremonial usage tends to underwrite and lend urgency to environmentalist leanings.

This paper proceeds in three parts. In the next section, I discuss ritual framing and cultivated affect in ceremonial substance use. The section that follows explores what I call coding of experience during introductory notes. Next, I analyze the relevance of songs and ritual management of excess matter or energy, before turning to formalized forms of exchanges during so-called sharing circles and the nature relations they engrain. In the final substantial section, I tease out how ritual framing shapes environmental views by considering informal exchanges with repeat attendees.



STRUCTURING AYAHUASCA CONTACT ZONES: RITUAL FRAMING, RHETORIC, AFFECT

Ayahuasca—a psychoactive concoction originating in the Amazon and an embodied practice now spreading across the globe—sits eerily among other

psychedelics. The brew is notorious for resisting attempts to standardize concentration and dose, disqualifying it from most clinical research. Yet, available evidence on brain dynamics and healing trajectories concur on the principally very promising qualities of the brew under controlled usage for the generation of health, well-being, and personal development (see, e.g., Grob et al. 1996; Jungaberle et al. 2018; Schmid, Jungaberle, and Verres 2010). Most drinkers agree that it must be consumed in a ceremonial setting under the auspices of supposedly traditional healers. The brew's continuing popularity thus involves ever increasing numbers of tourists seeking out treatment in the upper Amazon and increasing numbers of Amazonian healers touring the world to distribute the brew, thereby facilitating a rich tapestry of contact zones between people of different backgrounds and between people and plants. The anthropological accounts of these encounters focus largely on the issues of cultural appropriation, the potential for healing and abuse, or on transfer and hybridization (Labate and Cavnar 2014; Kavenská and Simonová 2015; Labate, Cavnar, and Gearin 2016; Fotiou 2016).

Ayahuasca and environmental relations appear closely entangled. Among Indigenous populations in the Amazon, ayahuasca plays a pivotal role in mediating between human and non-human actors and in negotiating forest landscapes (Descola 1998; Kohn 2013), as well as in collective decision-making processes also pertaining to the environment (Keifenheim 1999; Lagrou 2018). Similarly, the anthropological account of global ceremonial ayahuasca consumption features occasional examples of transformed environmental relations. Jeremy Narby notes changes in his own ways of perceiving and relating to nature in the course of research among ayahuasca drinking groups (Narby 1999). Starting off from his own experience with ayahuasca, Richard Doyle makes the case for rephrasing psychedelics as “ecodelics.” To him, “ecodelics manifest a capacity to be affected by an environment” (Doyle 2011, 201), and using them, many feel, “calls for their commitment to something other than themselves” (Doyle 2011, 21). Similarly, psychiatrist Charles Grob and colleagues note that members of one Brazilian ayahuasca church assess their own relationship with nature as having become more respectful since they became involved with the sacramental usage of the brew (Grob et al. 1996). On more general terms, Ralph Metzner notes that, “many people who have experienced ayahuasca . . . become deeply involved in ecological preservation and sustainability projects” (Metzner 1999b, 291). Oscar Calavia Sáez (2016, 74) claims that “it is difficult to dissociate current Ayahuasca groups and environmental concerns.”

Ayahuasca sessions unleash chaos bordering on the anarchic (Taussig 1991). Bodies scramble, drinkers moan as they vomit or endure overwhelming visions. But they are also structured proceedings, and the chaos is contained to a degree by clear ritual procedures, the recursive performances and

utterances that ritual specialists employ to make sense of challenging experiences (Reichel-Dolmatoff 1975). Richard Doyle emphasizes oral cultures' "linguistic *management* of psychedelic states" (Doyle 2011, 37, emphasis in original), that is, the framing of experiences by rhetorical technologies honed by specialists. In this view, the particularities of talking, doing, singing, and arranging do guide experiences.

In his study of ayahuasca neoshamanism in Australia, Alex Gearin notes the import of preconceived imageries of earth as a sentient being, such as Gaia or Mother Earth, for navigating the psychic and bodily effects of the brew. "There is an affective pedagogy," he argues, "in the neoshamanic mythologies of a sentient earth undergoing ecological and political crisis. . . the predicament of Gaia doubles as a map for 'navigating' the ayahuasca trance-realms. A global political and ecological crisis is described in ways that covertly inform drinkers how they *should* approach their ayahuasca trance experience and healing practice" (Gearin 2016, 136, emphasis in original).

I concur with Gearin on the partly discursive texture of the ayahuasca phenomenology, but I call attention to the very emergence of meaning and shifts in worldviews in the course of ritual performances. My approach complements, on one hand, pharmacological and neurological interpretations that attribute the increase in the connection to nature as an effect of the compounds themselves (e.g., Forstmann and Sagioglou 2017). On the other hand, it complements psychological approaches that explore the lasting effects psychedelics can induce, accounting for what consumers see or feel and how they make use of that in their everyday life (e.g., Kettner et al. 2019). Similarly, the making and remaking of reality, or more narrowly, of environmental affects during ceremonies, might be considered more profound in psychedelic substance use, given the degree of suggestibility (Tart 1969; Robin L. Carhart-Harris et al. 2015) or neuroplasticity (Vollenweider and Kometer 2010; Frecska, Bokor, and Winkelmann 2016) instilled by psychedelics. Agreeing that experiences kindled by pharmacological action are critical to psychedelic conduct, and taking increased suggestibility into account, I call attention to the ceremonial setting, which is rich in elements that frame and guide the experiences. I train my ethnographic lens at the setting, the ritual as practice, and narrative framings exchanged between ritual specialists and clients or participants. I explore how the ceremony as contact zone accomplishes an engraving of positive affects through patterned exchanges, phrasings, and practices that embody an intersubjective production of coherence.

My concern for the efficacy of rituals in psychedelic substance consumption has deep roots in the anthropology of health-seeking behavior and shamanism. Generations of anthropologists have demonstrated how such healing involves the intersubjective production of meaning and of affective

states, which may be facilitated also—as Claude Lévi-Strauss famously argued—by drama and the manipulation of objects (Lévi-Strauss 1963). Scholarship on the use of ayahuasca in “traditional” Amazonian healing confirms this (see, for instance, Descola 1998; Beyer 2010).

A vast literature explores the relevance of context for psychedelic experience. Breaking with a pharmacological model that would seek to explain experiences entirely by pharmacological action in the brain, clinical researchers and practitioners realized in the 1950s that individual experiences are strongly dependent on contextual parameters. Early psychedelic therapists coined the now widely used conceptual pair of “set” and “setting” (Pollan 2018; Leary, Metzner, and Alpert 1964), where set refers to individual factors (such as personality or expectations) whereas setting refers to broader contextual elements (such as the material environment of the session or cultural patterns; Hartogsohn 2020). Prior and parallel to that, anthropologists also explored “extra-drug parameters” (Hartogsohn 2017) in order to account for the huge differences in experiences the same substance might induce in different people. Contrasting how ethnically different people relate to substance-induced hallucinatory effects, Anthony Wallace emphasizes cultural differences (Wallace 1959). Societies evaluate hallucinogens or ecstatic experiences differently, he argues, shaping individual experiences in specific ways. Theorizing Indigenous experiences with psychedelic substances, anthropologists Gerardo Reichel-Dolmatoff and Marlene Dobkin de Rios, on the other hand, argue that experiences are molded by ritual specialists so as to confirm worldviews (Reichel-Dolmatoff 1975; Rios et al. 1975). Not only do set and setting produce specific visions, but these visions are also seen to cement specific cultural understandings in a kind of feedback loop.

Although the set and setting concept serves as an umbrella for sensitizing practitioners and for reflecting on context in all fields of psychedelic inquiry (see, e.g., Stolaroff 2004; Langlitz 2013), the relevance of ceremonial contexts remains not well understood. This is particularly acute against the background of the globalization of a number of psychedelic substances intimately connected to specific Indigenous or Mestizo traditions, such as peyote, iboga, or ayahuasca (Fernandez 1982; Labate and Cavnar 2014; Labate et al. 2016). As clients seek out healers in far flung corners of the world and as Indigenous ritual specialists tour the globe to provide healing, substance-based ceremonies become spheres where the navigation of psychedelic terrain intersects with that of postcolonial entanglements. Michael Taussig (1991) demonstrates that rituals of healing and the figure of the Amazonian shaman have long been spaces of cultural contact and mimicry, providing for a hall of mirrors. My paper takes this as a starting point and asks for specific ritual framings that occur during substance-based ceremonies—framings that are possibly unconnected to cultural figurations that participants would identify as their

own—and emerge in the contact zone between different people and between people and plants; and that spill out into the ordinary by way of shaping affect. What I refer to as the ritual framing of psychedelic experience is a mid-range concept, situated between the larger scheme of cultural framings and an individualized set, unfolding through performance within the space and time of ceremonies.

Throughout the next sections, I explore ritual framing during ayahuasca ceremonies, demonstrating how nature is related to as a sphere of learning, healing, and as a benevolent counterpart to getting rid of troublesome matter or energies.



WELCOME TO THE FOREST: CODING

Anxiety has taken over the room. Candles are lit, tea provided. People have prepared their own spaces, unfolding mattresses and piling up blankets so as to provide a comfortable space for the hours to come. The occasional late-comer looks out for a vacant spot and, after having secured one, quickly changes into casual clothes. Neighbors introduce themselves to one another, sharing expectations and anxieties or describing earlier experiences.

The room is infused with animal and plant symbolism. Talking among themselves, people refer to the healing capacities of the brew, of plants and plant spirits, or of teachers. Many have put up small shrines of their own, featuring ritual paraphernalia, such as natural perfumes, feathers, or jaguar figurines. Ritual specialists sport traditional dresses and impressive ornaments, including jaguar teeth necklaces or feather crowns, alongside further paraphernalia and wooden instruments.

Eventually the chatter subsides. The retreat commences with speeches delivered by ritual specialists and their assistants. Providing room for variation across groups and retreats, these speeches feature a welcome, an introduction (however short), and organizational details. Participants listen eagerly and take in what specialists and assistants say. The way participants return to what has been said later, after the session or during off-session conversations, testifies to this. Therefore, it makes sense to think of these talks as exercises in coding experiences and to explore them for the imageries they provide. It would of course be wrong to assume that talks guide and frame individual experiences in a straightforward manner. I rather suggest that, as rhetorical devices, they intersubjectively influence the field within which meaning emerges and within which personal transformation is experienced.

Sitting now behind a table crammed with paraphernalia, the Colombian ritual specialist begins by welcoming everyone. He thanks participants for joining this ceremony and for entrusting him with their healing. His words

are reassuring, easing some of the tension. Before the European facilitator takes over and explains a few more rules for the session, the healer briefly elaborates on the nature of the medicine. It is an ancestral medicine, he explains, releasing energies and providing cleansing. He introduces the concoction as made up of two plants, a vine and a leaf, working together to clear blockades, to let energies flow freely. Together they are Yagé (one of ayahuasca's many names), who is a grandfather (*abuelo*) and a teacher (*taita*). He refers to a distinction often drawn in global ayahuasca cultures: to some in Colombia, including him, the medicine is a grandfather; to others, notably in Brazil, it is a grandmother. But plants, he concludes, don't have a gender, and it is the plant that heals and from which we learn and grow.

In another group, gathering around another set-up of healers and facilitators, the connection between healing and nature is explicit. Here, we are welcomed to work with the medicine of the forest and to experience the forest itself during sessions. In his welcome note delivered during one retreat, one of the healers introduces the brew as the "school of the forest" (*escola da floresta*) and as its "teacher" (*profesora*). He invites us to study together in this school and with this teacher. This phrasing resonates well with the recurrent themes of learning and development that underpin much underground psychedelic practice at the confluence of self-exploration and spirituality. But it also positions the bitter brew as an access point to a knowledge that is embodied in nature, to insights about being humane and good that are woven into the very fabric of the woods. This way of speaking of the forest in a reverent manner undergirds conversations throughout this group's activities, obviously both expressing and engraining positive affects toward nature.

Taking over, his partner emphasizes the powers of the medicine to connect—between people, between living beings, with the forest, and with Mother Earth. This message is amplified also by the usage of organic metaphors. There is recurrent mention of growth as a mode of healing. The brew helps its imbibers to grow closer to one another and to the forest, culminating in an imagery of mutual growth. In abstract terms, these speeches introduce the brew as a natural medicine and underscore the notion that healing or wholeness depends precisely on being connected to nature.

At this point, facilitators may occasionally also relate these rather abstract notions to specific problems. Such was the case when, in 2019, the election of right-wing Jair Bolsonaro as the president of Brazil triggered very justified fears by Indigenous populations and their global allies, or when, shortly thereafter, in summer 2019, forest fires in Brazil's Amazon region again made the headlines. Both incidents figured in speeches as dramatic outcomes that require healing of the kind aimed for by these ceremonies. Leaving the fascinating entanglements of ritual and politics aside for now, such statements explicitly relate medicine and retreats to environmental conservation and a

reappraisal of nature. Healers and facilitators will take up these concepts in brief statements and in song throughout sessions across Europe. Thus, the notion of the plant as healer and as a benign grandfather or grandmother appears again and again in conversations throughout ceremonies, as I will demonstrate throughout the remainder of this paper.

After the welcome and introductory remarks, the facilitators turned to organizational details. I will return to one aspect of these in the next section.



DOING AYAHUASCA: SONGS, HOLES, RELEASE

Now it is dark except for a few candles distributed throughout the room. The healer has just wrapped up his brief speech. All participants are in their places, and conversation has ceased. It is time to ingest the medicine, the healer declares. Now wearing a full feather crown, a jaguar teeth bracelet, and a blue poncho amid a number of bracelets and necklaces, he appears eerily out of place in the German countryside. He bends over the glass bottle holding the brew and starts singing to the steady beat of the rattle (*chacapa*) he holds in his other hand. It is a rather simple song, sung in Spanish, that conjures up the powers of the brew. With an urgent voice, he calls Grandfather Yagé to come and cure and cleanse. After this is done, he calls participants to come up to the front one by one and drink a glass.

We stand quietly. The only thing I hear are the people at the head of the queue as they ask in hushed tones for either a small or a full dose, followed by occasional groans as they swallow the putrid liquid and shuffle about on their way back to their places in the circle. When everyone has had their fill, the silence thickens, pierced only by groaning and the first sounds of vomiting. But very soon the healer starts making music. I find myself relieved—the songs release some of the tension and overlay the not so pleasant sounds of purging. More importantly, however, they are seen to invoke the healing powers of the brew and to summon the forces of nature. “The songs are part of the medicine,” I hear one healer explaining between singing as the effects begin to take hold.

Generally speaking, music plays a key role in ayahuasca ceremonies (Rios et al. 1975; Beyer 2010). Participants consider songs medicinal and regularly evaluate the quality of ceremonies and their facilitators not only in terms of the strength of the brew but also in terms of the beauty or power of the music. During a conversation, one healer relates how he used to play recorded music during ceremonies until attendees told him that they would prefer his perhaps uncouth but live tunes to any even well produced recorded track. Interestingly, the tunes he used to play were a mix of forest sounds and world music, thus ensuring an atmosphere, I suggest, that was

simultaneously as close to the images of ayahuasca as an exotic jungle brew as it was to instigating feelings of being held by “good mother nature” (Gearin 2016).

It would be wrong, of course, to assume that all participate in these songs in the same way. Participants are intoxicated to differing degrees, with some claiming to having lost touch with their surroundings as they are swept into visionary worlds or immersed in key episodes of their lives. Similarly, linguistic diversity among healers, participants, and within the group may well inhibit apprehension of what is actually sung. Healers and facilitators attempt to bridge this gap in many cases by providing translations and interpretations of songs sung in Indigenous languages during the ceremonies or by including songs in the more widely understood Spanish or English. However, given the rather repetitive nature of all these songs, their brief lyrics, and the availability of songbooks, the songs themselves are easy to pick up. Given these considerations, the songs sung during all substance-induced sessions appear to be powerful rhetorical devices that guide and align the experiences.

During another ceremony on the other side of the city, the healers begin to sing immediately after everyone had ingested their glass of ayahuasca. Many of the songs in this ceremony are sung in a language indigenous to the Amazon, but many of the participants know these songs by heart and join in. The songs sung immediately after ingestion of the brew are understood as invocations. Singers call specific entities, such as the moon or the forest, or specific spirits or animals by their names in order to assist in healing.

A few hours into the session, rather somber invocations, “*icaros*,” give way to “hymns,” festive songs expressing joy, love, and warmth. The repertoire of *icaros* is specific to every healer, with these songs forming a type of capital that every healer gathers directly, it is often argued, from plants, animals, or spirits (Beyer 2010; Callicott 2013). The repertoire of hymns, on the other hand, is wide. For the most part supported by guitars and rattles, their lighter tone characterizes the mood of the later part of sessions. First, they are selected and sung by facilitators. Later still, healers usually declare the room open, at which point any of the participants is welcome to contribute a song, which many gladly do.

A number of hymns are drawn from the wider field of spiritual songs, featuring Eastern motifs. Some are specific to ayahuasca ceremonies, praising the medicine and its healing powers. Others still are specific to the regional setting in which the healers situate themselves. A popular example of this is “*Aguila Aguile*,” of which I provide an excerpt from the Spanish original and an English translation below:⁴

Desde lejos...
desde lejos oigo

el canto enamorado
de un pájaro...
Y ese pájaro...
Es mi abuelo
Es mi abuelo que canta,
Que canta enamorado
Y ese pájaro
Es mi abuela
Es mi abuela que canta,
Que canta enamorada
 ...
From afar...
from far away I hear
the love song
of a bird ...
And that bird ...
Is my grandfather
It's my grandfather who sings,
And he sings in love
And that bird
It's my grandmother
It's my grandmother who sings,
And she sings in love

Songs such as this one introduce animals or their spirits as loving and caring entities. Many songs also refer to the brew, its constituents, or spirits as a grandmother/grandfather of the participants or of humankind at large. In other words, singers turn to animals, plants, or their spirits as kin, articulating trans-human kinship and performing; as Donna Haraway calls it, a process of “kinning” across species boundaries (Haraway 2016). This resonates with animist worldviews found among Amazonian groups where ayahuasca originated (Kohn 2013; Luna 2018). It also resonates with animist conceptions found in Western neoshamanist circles more widely (Von Stuckrad 2002). Praising plants and animals as kin destabilizes anthropocentric visions that, arguably, are at the core of the current environmental impasse. To think of the world as animate, or to relate to specific entities as sentient beings is, of course, not causally related to sustainable behavior (that is to say, animists may very well degrade their environments [Taussig and Wilson 2002]), but it articulates specific affective registers. Furthermore, these articulations are underpinned by a selective take on animism. Animals and plants are introduced as beneficial entities and not as threatening or ambiguous entities, an attitude that ignores the whole complex of Amazonian assault sorcery (Fausto 2004; Fotiou

2016). Yet, in listening or partaking in songs, an affective stance toward particular plants and animals is being performed and practiced, which appears to have an import on one's general stance toward nature. As one participant remarked to me in an on-retreat conversation, "we are here to practice attitudes and habits, such as connectedness and proximity to nature, that are extremely difficult to carry on into the everyday."

The connection among songs, images, and a loving stance toward nature is evident also in the way hummingbirds are addressed across neoshamanic ceremonies. Ayahuasca and hummingbirds appear to be closely related in many ways. Among a number of Amazonian people, hummingbirds are understood as painters of patterns seen under the influence of the brew (Illius 1987; Keifenheim 2000).

Late into a session, between two songs, one Amazonian healer explains to us that his community reveres the birds not for being beautiful but for being fearless and brave. Once hummingbirds take aim, he explains, they will do anything to reach their goal, without ever retreating. Far from being merely a beautiful sight, the bird is introduced here as something worthwhile to mimic and, to put it in the language of ayahuasca shamanism, as a teacher from whom to learn.

The same holds true for snakes. Certain kinds of large snakes, such as the anaconda or the boa constrictor, are a recurrent theme in the songs, stories, and ornamentation associated with ayahuasca consumption (Shanon 2002). What is more, among a number of Indigenous groups, it is an important part of ayahuasca sessions to dance the snake dance, and so it is practiced also in retreat centers outside of Berlin. Well into the relaxed and joyful later parts of a session, participants get up, and we dance as a snake. Led by a healer or facilitator, people line up with one or two hands resting on the shoulders of the person in front, and wind through the room, swaying, rattling, and singing to the tune of yet another hymn. Ayahuasca shamanism features many levels to the notion and practice of turning into a snake, and I am not suggesting that participants relate to all of them. Yet, this blissful mode of "anaconda becoming" (Lagrou 2018) not only ties people closer as a group, but it also involves, once again, mimicking nature and learning to embrace it beyond more abstract theoretical leanings. As we sway through the room, I see widely smiling faces taking in the joy of being the snake. Later on, one participant tells me that snakes and medicine are closely related, for both are of the forest and command respect.

Although all the songs mentioned so far address individual plants or animals, a number of songs employ abstract notions. There are songs to nature, referred to in the Quechua phrase of *Pachamama* or in a Western idiom of *Mother Earth/Madre Tierra/Mutter Erde*. This motif is, of course, common to contemporary neoshamanic and spiritual practices and even to

environmentalists of varying hues. Occasionally, healers also invoke songs of unity or of the truth. Facilitators insist that these refer to a state of mutuality between beings and classes of beings that easily goes asunder in everyday consciousness. In their abstract terms, these songs similarly articulate trans-human kinship relations as an ideal.

In this hybrid contact zone of cosmovisions and healing concepts, singing together, listening to songs, and discussing possible meanings articulate and perform trans-human kinship relations. Singing to the plants as kin, teachers, and care providers, as I have demonstrated, puts anthropocentric visions into perspective and anchors positive affective dimensions in participants subjected to pharmacologically enhanced states of suggestibility.

The establishment of connection, culminating in forms of kinning, also occurs in the way bodily bile and excess energies are managed in ayahuasca ceremonies. The brew is known for its strong emetic capacities, and vomiting is a frequent feature of ritual sessions. In neoshamanic contexts, the release of bodily fluids is bound up with subjective transformation trajectories (see Metzner 1999a; Luna and White 2016; Fotiou and Gearin 2019). Most participants consider vomiting to be a key part in bodily and mental processes of cleansing. Indeed, to some this is *the* medicine, on par with or dwarfing visual effects or insights received. Frequently, German native speakers use the English term purging or the Spanish *la purga*, subsuming further forms of excretion, such as feces, sweat, tears, or excessive yawning. But even if this is the case, vomiting itself remains central. My interlocutors frequently rendered it in terms of psychologized ailments, as was the case with the participant who claimed to have seen his father's face in the bucket, continuing to spit on it and thereby getting over—as he described it—a father/son relationship gone terribly wrong. Beyond such elaborated takes on vomit, drinkers uniformly identify vomit as bile purged from the body in a process of deep cleansing.⁵ Against this background, I suggest that the ritual management of bile or of excess energy performs and engrains specific forms of relating to nature.

A number of ritual set-ups delegate vomiting outside of the structures serving as the main ritual space. Here, participants are asked to step out of buildings or tipis and to empty themselves into holes dug specifically for this purpose. During conversations, the facilitators noted that such an arrangement helps avoid distracting the other participants by keeping the space quieter, thereby allowing each attendee to maintain their focus on their own internal processes. Most ritual set-ups, however, integrate vomiting into the main ritual space. Participants bring their own buckets, which they keep close to themselves at most times. However, even where individual buckets are the norm, facilitators take care to have them emptied into holes during or after sessions. Facilitators sometimes position large containers at a central

point for participants to empty their buckets into and make sure that these containers will be emptied into a hole that was previously dug, whereas other facilitators ask individual participants to empty their buckets directly into such holes. The language through which this is announced and suggested matters. In all cases, facilitators speak of this as a way to give back to the earth. Purged liquids are not simply to be flushed into invisible drains but rather given up and returned into nature. Thus, the earth becomes coded in speech and practice as an entity that facilitates healing by relieving individuals from bodily and psychic excess materials and as something that matters for personal healing and transformation.

Alongside violent purging, ayahuasca may be overwhelming. Advice on how to navigate the states induced by the brew follows a similar logic. During introductions, for instance, healers sometimes recommend that a person step out of the ritual space if they become overwhelmed and go and touch the earth or a tree. In Amazonian and neoshamanic contexts, healing cosmologies cohere, among others, around the theme of energy. Blockades inhibiting inner balances may be flushed by the energies received during treatment. Beneficial as it is, ritual specialists agree, it may be hard to bear. It helps, we are told, to channel forces back into the earth or trees in order to relieve one's system from excess energy and to align flows. It is tempting to unpack the notion of energies as it is being used in neoshamanic contexts as another boundary object to which actors relate differently in postcolonial worlds (Star and Griesemer 1989) or, at the very least, a working misunderstanding (Sahlins 1987) malleable enough to be applied to radically different worldviews and healing systems. Here, I merely want to emphasize that in this framing, once again, nature is rendered intelligible as an agent helping to absorb excess matter and energy. Nature here is approached as a beneficial counterpart, ready to absorb bile and, in so doing, helping to establish balance. It is enacted as something to relate to in the process of healing or transforming, underwriting affective relations.



DISCUSSING EXPERIENCES: VISIONS AND FEELINGS

Sunday, the final day of the retreat. Some have already left; many others store away their mattresses and ritual paraphernalia or empty their buckets. Slowly, the room transitions back from a ceremonial site to a multi-purpose space.

Around noon, it is time for the sharing circle. People sit down on the ground in a circle, and one of the facilitators welcomes all to this final activity closing the ceremony. Sharing circles are integral parts of such ayahuasca retreats. They are meant to provide space for people to articulate and share

their experiences, thus allowing, or so it is hoped, to foster integration of extraordinary experiences or insights into everyday life and to underpin lasting personal transformation (Gearin 2015).

In European ceremonies, sharing circles are exercises in polyphony oscillating between German, English, and Spanish or Portuguese. To differing degrees, all sharing circles are spaces of conversations and dialogue between attendants and ritual specialists. Occasionally, sharing circles take the form of a direct dialogue between an individual attendant and ritual specialist commenting directly after each statement, suggesting ways forward, or trying to explain and situate experiences.

Most sharing circles, however, are framed by an opening and a concluding statement by healers, between which attendants put forward their narratives, thoughts, and take-home messages without being commented upon by anyone directly. In place of direct conversations, concluding statements also allow ample space for ritual specialists to take up specific issues, to develop themes, and to relate what has been said with regard to ideas of health, well-being, and transformation. These are spaces of intersubjective meaning production and attempts to achieve some coherence on frequently overwhelming and unfamiliar experiences, establishing bridges between what appear to be discrete cosmologies and notions of health and well-being. In other words, they mark another sphere of working misunderstandings where uncharted terrains of psychedelic experience intersect with postcolonial entanglements. The relevance of speech for attempts to come to terms with substance-induced experiences is not new. The craft of Amazonian ayahuasca shamanism coheres around the intersubjective production of coherence, and good shamans distinguish themselves by the capacity to explain, illuminate, and establish meaning (Reichel-Dolmatoff 1975; Beyer 2010). Existing research on global ayahuasca consumption has paid scant attention to these retrospective endeavors. Therefore, my discussion focuses on the cultivation of nature-related affects in these prolonged formalized exchanges. I understand these as critical venues for the framing of individual experiences involving the performance of statements and listening to other people's testimonies. Here, too, meaning is produced, often in ways that resonate with the utterances offered by ritual specialists, further anchoring a sense of awe and a love of nature.

After the short welcome note, delivered by the healer in Spanish and translated into German, participants begin to talk one after the other. Participants are free to delve into details, and one facilitator now translates German and English testimonies into Spanish for the benefit of the healer. I listen to people detailing what they went through in both sessions, frequently returning to their intentions set at the onset of the retreat and if and how this manifested. The air is ripe with allusions to moments of despair and bliss, and with references to progress being made—be it in the form of personal insights

gathered, in the form of overdue cleansings while purging violently, or in the form of realizing mystical unity and connectedness. Some speak of how they faced shame and fear. Others speak of ego death. Still, others refer to the profound and nourishing experience of boundless love. In detailing trajectories of healing, spiritual growth, or psychonautic exploration, people relate in specific ways to plants and the natural world. In doing so, they articulate shared understandings while simultaneously engraining such understandings among the people listening and reflecting.

In fact, as my interlocutors take turns to deliver their testimonies, and as I sit through several such circles, it occurs to me that they tend to be structured in a specific way. One such element is the recurrent theme of gratitude and humility toward plant medicine and plants in general. As a rule of thumb, testimonies generally start off with an expression of thanks toward the brew, the plants, and the forest. In their differing ways, speakers relate to the plant world as a healing agent, teacher, or well-wisher. Many are fairly specific, emphasizing gratitude toward the plants' power to provide crucial insights or to relive troubling episodes. Niklas, an event manager, expresses his gratitude to Grandmother Ayahuasca for providing crucial insights and for guiding him on a path to self-realization. Others are less specific and simply convey thanks for connecting with plants and being able to celebrate healing (*die Heilung feiern*). In such statements, the concoction emerges not only as a powerful agent but as an entity deserving humility and utmost respect; as a nexus of beings at once nourishing and confronting; and as a sphere that deserves to be addressed in the logic of spiritual reverence. But in so doing, they refer to the brew—and this is important—as a medicine, and they voice respect, humility, and thankfulness toward the plants that make up the brew and the “traditional” knowledge crystallized, as it were, by the shaman and the ritual set-up. Parts of nature are venerated and decidedly non-modern approaches to reality are emphasized.

Furthermore, narratives frequently express specific connections or insights generated via plants, expressing both awe and a shifted sense of what plants' powers hold and how they are important beyond individual healing. Karla's contribution to the sharing circle demonstrates this well. A nurse who regularly attends ceremonies, she begins by expressing gratitude. But she is very specific about not only whom to thank but for what. In addition to describing how her personal ailments have improved, she emphasizes the very connection, indeed, an increased sense of relatedness to the Amazonian group where one healer originates. She speaks of having been able to learn from the Indigenous group by partaking in the medicine, feeling increasingly tied to them as family and to the forest they call home. Her testimony expresses a sense of being rooted in the Amazonian forest without having ever physically been there, a personal connection, and a sense of having become kin via the

brew. Ethnographies of nature conservation and environmental movements tell us how important a sense of connection and personal witness is for taking action (e.g., Tsing 2005). Mediated by ceremonies, the brew appears to instantiate such place-based relations without traveling there.

Another element consists of what I understand as calls for socioecological or environmental commitment. This theme appears less frequently but still consistently across all ceremonial contexts in which I have taken part. Tanja—also a regular—explains after going through some of her experiences that in all the healing provided and love experienced during the retreat, it is paramount to think of ways of giving back and contributing to more sustainable forms of development in the Amazon and beyond. Michael, a facilitator of retreats himself, burst out during a more informal sharing circle that it is the plants who are bringing we very different people together so that we work out solutions and chart ways out of the current socioecological impasse marked by hunger, overexploitation, and runaway growth. It is worth noting that I only witnessed people articulating this theme who have been involved for at least several years and have often themselves assisted in one way or the other in holding retreats. Thus, there might be a relation between duration and intensity of consumption and shifts in worldview toward planetary commitments, akin to the positive relation between regular attendance and the shifts in addiction behavior and psychosocial well-being that has been well documented in studies on Brazilian ayahuasca churches (Grob et al. 1996).

On this cloudy Sunday afternoon, the healer concludes the circle. His speech stays clear of commenting on specificities and engages in abstract rhetorical framings. As a comment, perhaps, on people emphasizing the powers of the brew, and their feeling overpowered at times, he engages the concept of power (*poder*, *Kraft*). There is power working within us, he explains to his attentive audience, and this power comes from the elements, from Mother Earth (*madre tierra*), and from the universe; this power in itself provides healing. Given this setting's strong orientation toward individual healing and personal or spiritual development, this statement can be read as an assurance of self-transformation. Simultaneously, it takes up a sense of connection that participants assert having experienced, highlighting the beneficial and soothing dimensions of realizing connectedness and underwriting the ecological dimensions thereof. After all, nature, whether in the more intimate form of Mother Earth or the more abstract form of the universe, emerges as a restorative force. As he wraps up his short speech, he returns to the beneficial effects of being interconnected. He will now return home, he says, and continue the work from there. But as all are connected, people over here will also feel the effects. In a space marked by an increased suggestibility, statements such as these further anchor a sense of connectedness and affective ties with nature.



REVERING NATURE

Alongside formalized exchanges during sharing circles or introductory talks, retreats feature frequent informal instances of an intersubjective production of coherence.⁶ I have touched upon these throughout. Approaching my conclusion, I briefly return to such informal exchanges between repeat attendees. Because this paper is concerned only with on-site, on-retreat encounters, considering conversations between people describing themselves as being well on the path (*auf dem Weg*) allows me to explore and demonstrate shifts in meaning in the long run.

During the same retreat, one regular participant tells me of his encounter with ayahuasca. A designer in his late twenties, like so many others, he decided to join such a ceremony in a moment of personal crisis. He felt trapped in toxic relationship patterns and hoped to find ways of upending or shifting these patterns with the help of ayahuasca. During a period of rest on the same retreat, he tells me that his ways of going about relationships have improved and that he has gained a lot in terms of personal transformation, thus, staying within the developmental narrative characterizing many on-site retreat conversations. A little while later, he turns to how his stance toward nature has changed, and refers to altered, greened forms of everyday consumption and a more sustainable diet, concluding, tongue in cheek, that tree hugging finally makes full sense to him.

Switch to another retreat. It is early in the morning, and I help prepare the breakfast for the group. While cutting fruit, Christian and I talk about ceremonies and everyday life. A lawyer and father, he has been attending these ceremonies for a couple of years now, joining at least twice a year. I provoke him by asking about addiction—that is, the potential and threat of becoming addicted to ayahuasca itself, while perhaps using it in order to get over many other addictions. He disagrees. Even if one uses it regularly, it remains a medicine that works to heal and help one become a better person. This is what the plants do, he says, what they bestow. It cannot be bad, because connecting with these plants and letting them do their work is in every way beneficial. This brief exchange, mirroring a sentiment widely shared on retreats, resonates well with what the healer said during the integration circle and demonstrates the intersubjective production of coherence and meaning in these contact zones. Alongside humility and the will to improve, it demonstrates a caring attitude toward at least some specific medicinal plants and a respect and love for these plants that replaces the participants' initial fears and anxieties, about which Christian spoke with me on other occasions. As we continue slicing fruit, he goes on to explain that his relationship with nature has changed tremendously during the years of

drinking the brew. Yes, of course, it changed tremendously, he states emphatically, “How could it be otherwise given the nature of this brew?”

Throughout, such conversations routinely oscillate between referring to the concoction, and, by extension, the forest, as an archive of medicinal plants, a zone of cross-species intimacy, and a medium of instruction offered by venerable entities, be they plants, animals, or spirits. I have noted already how participants refer to the concoction or its plant ingredients as grandmother or grandfather, respectively. There is also a lot of talk about plant spirits, plant teachers, and of plant wisdom and plant power, demanding and deserving humility on the side of drinkers.

In his study on similar settings in Australia, Alex Gearin explores the cultural critique sustained in and through such conversations, demonstrating how nature is positioned as an antidote to Western ailments (Gearin 2016). This point is well taken and resonates with my material from Europe. I want to add that in voicing such critiques, participants express and furnish visions of nature as benevolent and worth protecting, not only for utilitarian purposes as a medicine but very often also for its own sake. In short, they resonate well with framings of the ritual and re-inscribing what could be called environmentalist affects and concerns.



CONCLUSION

In this paper, I have explored ways of arranging, talking, singing, and doing as means of framing substance-induced experiences for the affective environmental relations they underwrite and potentially anchor in participants. My paper thus adds to an emerging scholarship on shifts in perceiving and relating to nature among users of psychedelics. Training ethnographic attention to the particularities of ceremonial usage, I have demonstrated a ritual framing of experience engraining positive affect toward nature under conditions of increased suggestibility. Plants are addressed as healers, teachers, or embodiments of wisdom. Besides being a source of rejuvenation, nature is also rendered as an entity ready to relieve participants of their bodily bile and psychic burdens. Finally, in speeches and conversations, a sense of humility and connectedness is cultivated. Taken together, these quotidian means allow, I have suggested, for an accidental environmentalism, perhaps by triggering pharmacological properties of the concoction.

This dimension has been overlooked not only by a number of researchers and commentators but also by the drinkers of the brew themselves. Against this background, this paper is not only an attempt to provide evidence of underground psychedelic practice, but is an exercise in addressing social change. Complementing certainly important critiques of cultural

appropriation, ayahuasca's potential ceremonial use to foster positive attitudes toward nature and perhaps even to instill environmentalist ethics warrants attention.

However, my paper has, by virtue of the study design, little to say on the relevance of transformed affirmative relations for concrete practices, choices, and consumption patterns. A gap between convictions and practices in the field of environmental conservation is well demonstrated. In fact, Christina Callicott warns that plant-induced experiences of connection and care do not (automatically) influence everyday decision making (Callicott 2016). These are critical concerns, especially given the distinctive patterns of environmental degradation that are specifically connected to the rising global demand for ayahuasca, including the increased CO₂ footprints of globe-hopping facilitators and participants, the disruptive environmental impacts of ayahuasca tourism, and the overharvesting of the ingredients used to make ayahuasca in order to serve the exploding market. Even given such a gap between propositions and practices, I do not understand affective dimensions as secondary. Indeed, affective dimensions govern the evaluation of scientific results or political outlooks and might well contribute to shifts in behavior in the long run.

In the annals of psychedelic research, this constellation is strangely familiar. Attempts to harness psychedelic substances for individual or social well-being encounter a similar problem and have rendered efforts to integrate peak experiences into non-peak everyday life critical. The task at hand, then, would be to include environmental affects into the emerging landscape of integration. This could very well serve as a step toward reorienting healing models so as to embrace “the demands of mutuality and reciprocity that indigenous culture envisions for these kinds of changes” (Stephen Beyer 2013 in Callicott 2016, 118).



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NOTES

¹ Given the illegal nature of these retreats, I have taken care to protect sensitive data. This involves anonymizing all names, omitting occasional web sources, and blurring some details.

- ² In view of the debate on the merits of using the term “shaman” to refer to anyone who is practicing outside of a very narrowly defined geographical region (Siberia) and who is conducting a specific type of activity (namely, journeying into other worlds for the sake of their clients; see, e.g., Znamenski 2007), I refer to ritual specialists distributing the brew as healers. Healers frequently abstain from calling themselves shamans but rather understand themselves as healers or facilitators (with plant medicine being understood as the healer). This being the case, the overwhelming majority of attendees nevertheless use the term “shamans” throughout.
- ³ For a discussion of ayahuasca’s historical roots, see, for example, Gow (1996) or Torres (2018).
- ⁴ <https://entheonation.com/blog/aguila-aguile-canto-enamorado/>
- ⁵ None of my interviewees identified bile with the sorcery or magical darts that are a common feature within the contexts of shamanic healing in the Amazon and beyond. Only very rarely was it identified with spiritual parasites, which could be interpreted as a kind of boundary object between the worlds of attack sorcery and Western spiritualism.
- ⁶ In this paper, I do not explore individual consultations or treatments with healers. A common feature of most ceremonies, these require extra payments and take place in private.

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