



Conference report

The expansion of the field of research on ayahuasca: Some reflections about the ayahuasca track at the 2010 MAPS “Psychedelic Science in the 21st Century” conference

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A recent conference sponsored by the Multidisciplinary Association for Psychedelic Studies (MAPS) in collaboration with the Heffter Research Institute, the Beckley Foundation and the Council on Spiritual Practices held from April 15th to 18th 2010, in San José, USA (MAPS, 2010) united 90 presenters and 1100 participants with the goal of giving visibility to studies on the therapeutic potentials of psychedelics (psilocybin, MDMA, ibogaine, ayahuasca, etc.) in the treatment of often intractable ailments such as anxiety in terminal cancer patients, cluster headaches, obsessive–compulsive disorders, drug addiction, and post-traumatic stress disorders, as well as the role of these substances in human enhancement and well-being in general. MAPS was chartered in 1986, with the mission to develop cannabis and psychedelics into prescription medicines to treat illnesses, to build a network of clinics where these prescription medicines can be administered, and to provide public education on the harm and benefits of using psychedelics and cannabis. The institution has managed to get the permission of the DEA and FDA to conduct a number of clinical trials with psychedelics over the years. Straddling the fence between establishment and counterculture, MAPS has generally been criticized by mainstream medicine for promoting the use of “dangerous drugs,” while other members of the psychedelic community have complained that MAPS is either too medically focused or too incendiary in its tactics with the US government. Ultimately, MAPS continues to enjoy the popular support of many and occupy a leading position on the field, such as the development, with the support of other important institutions, of the *Psychedelic Science in the 21st Century* conference

The gathering was held in Silicon Valley, where psychedelics have often, though quietly, been credited with helping to inspire

the digital revolution of the past few decades (Markoff, 2005). This conference, one of the largest of its kind, was in many ways a continuation of the academic investigations of psychedelics of the 1950s–1970s, including the work of Timothy Leary, Aldous Huxley and many others (Winkelman & Roberts, 2007).

We look here at the increasing interest in the use of ayahuasca as presented from various points of reference through this conference. Ayahuasca is a drink originating in South America containing DMT that is used in rituals by indigenous and mestizo shamans, as sacrament in two international churches, the Santo Daime and the União do Vegetal, and by Western psychotherapeutic, new age and psychonautic circles. Studies about ayahuasca dialogue with classic and contemporary questions in ethnobotany, pharmacology, anthropology, religious studies, law, music, psychiatry, psychology and several other disciplines. These studies have tried to keep pace with the ways the consumption of the substance has diversified, and have themselves grown in number and type of approach. This area of research also has great importance for discussions of the consumption of so-called “drugs of abuse,” harm-reduction and prohibitionism (Labate, Rose, & Santos, 2009).

The current article examines the nature of the contributions to the Ayahuasca Track and note the mix of persons, from research scientists to shamans, including many seekers of healing and spiritual experience, interested in the topic. We draw an overview of the track debates, and ideas that perhaps deserve more space are considered, and notable presentations are discussed. Finally, we reflect on the ethical, political and methodological challenges involved in research with ayahuasca. We hope that this text will provide a useful review of the current state of research in the field of ayahuasca studies.

Originally envisioning just two tracks, the “Continuing Medical Education (CME) Track” and the “Non-CME” or “Research and Cultural Track,” the MAPS conference staff saw a new and unexpected third track appear, the “Ayahuasca Track,” which was created as

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a result of the high number of proposals submitted by presenters from different disciplines on the topic of ayahuasca. It was as if the vine had spontaneously invaded the space of the conference as it pleased. No doubt this is evidence of the increasing interest in the use of this plant throughout the world (Labate et al., 2009; Labate, 2004, 2005; Tupper, 2008) despite the fact that among psychedelics, ayahuasca is less studied from a biomedical or clinical perspective than others substances discussed in the CME-track.

Brazilian anthropologist and ayahuasca researcher Beatriz Caiuby Labate (Labate & MacRae, 2006, 2010; Labate & Pacheco, 2010; Labate et al., 2009) moderated the Ayahuasca Track, which was composed of 22 presentations about ayahuasca. Apart from that, there was also a poster presentation on ayahuasca use in the United States; the Spanish pharmacologist Jordi Riba (Riba et al., 2006, 2003, 2001) gave a summary of his work concerning the first controlled studies of the human neuropsychopharmacology of ayahuasca in the CME track; and the Canadian filmmaker Richard Meech showed his 2009 one-hour documentary “The Vine of the Soul: Encounters with Ayahuasca” late one night.

Another indication of the increase in public interest on the topic of ayahuasca could be found outside the official conference program itself, in the presence of several other filmmakers who attended the conference. Mark Ellam is a documentary filmmaker from Canada who has been working for eight years on a film produced for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation’s “Nature of Things” about ayahuasca, its use in psychotherapy and community, and its neurochemistry. Another filmmaker present was Maxi Cohen, an artist from New York City who is shooting “The Holy Give Me,” a film about the use of ayahuasca in Brazil, from its roots with Amazonian indigenous peoples through its transformation into religious use and its growth into the world beyond Brazil. Also attending the meeting was the Brazilian photographer Luis Eduardo Pomar, the editor of the film “Wine of the Souls,” a 2007 documentary that follows six foreigners along their paths in search of healing, self-discovery and mystical experiences in a Santo Daime community in the Brazilian Amazon.

The Ayahuasca Track was a mixture of health sciences, social sciences, and reports on personal experiences with the brew. Among tables, statistics, tough sociological debates and prayers to Mother Earth, the group worked intensively during three days, with most of the rooms at full capacity throughout. The track was a universe unto itself inside the conference, and it seemed that participants in the other two tracks were somewhat unaware of what happened there, and vice versa. The panels included topics such as ayahuasca as psychological therapy, its effect on cognition and mental health, its use in the treatment of addiction and the treatment of cancer, its relationship to spirituality, arts, sex and music, public policies relating to its use, and so forth. The presenters were mainly from the United States and Canada, but more distant places were also represented, including Brazil and Europe, among others. The panelists included psychologists, psychiatrists, workshops facilitators, anthropologists, doctors, lawyers, disciples, teachers, public policy administrators, writers and even a politician.

It is noteworthy that some talks were not academic in nature, but rather self-reflections of the practitioners on their own experiences or basically institutional presentations by ayahuasca retreat centres. In fact, these seemed to be the most popular talks in the track. Some of these sessions were followed by questions such as, “I drank ayahuasca and felt pain; what does this mean?” “I took ayahuasca and slept; why does this happen?” “Why did I have such a vision?” “I had this trauma in my childhood and I wonder if taking ayahuasca could help me overcome this?” etc. This gave a strange flavour to a conference that identified itself as scientific and aimed to create political legitimacy for the use of psychedelic medicines. MAPS staff’s selection of a significant number of these presentation proposals for the track and the unexpected questions

posed by the public underscored the lack of institutional or intellectual space to formally discuss the implications of the worldwide expansion of ayahuasca use and the challenges of those who organize and participate in contemporary ayahuasca workshops.

Although some aspects of the Ayahuasca Track seemed to represent a non-scientific self-help spirit, one could argue that by accommodating such diverse audiences and presenters MAPS is also helping to develop a culture of public education and awareness about the use of ayahuasca, and giving professionals such as psychotherapists a rich view of the experiences and concerns of individuals who use and are affected by ayahuasca. A format in which personal expectations and problems are shared may also be helpful to those therapists who are interested in developing guidelines for ethical use of ayahuasca when given in a psychotherapeutic context, as opposed to a religious or shamanic one. In fact, one of the missions of MAPS is to create protocols for the therapeutic use of psychedelics. Beside the scientific and educational goals of the conference, the decision of the MAPS organisation to include some presentations geared to audiences more interested in decoding their own experiences than in scientific data may have been made in order to enhance the opportunities for future fundraising benefits arising from this partnership with the growing ayahuasca community.

Some of the new research presentations in the Ayahuasca Track deserve comment. Spanish psychiatrist J.M. Fábregas presented the results of research by a Spanish-Brazilian collaborative team coordinated by psychologist José Carlos Bouso from Spain. The study was executed in Brazil with a total of 56 ayahuasca-using volunteers from Santo Daime and 71 from Barquinha who were compared to a total of 56 from one rural control group of non-users of ayahuasca and 59 from another in an urban setting. In his first study, the research team enlisted 56 participants from the CEFLURIS branch of Santo Daime living in the Amazonian jungle community of Céu do Mapiá who had experience using ayahuasca for at least 15 years a minimum of 4 times a month and compared them with a control group of 56 non-users from a similar neighbouring rural town in the Amazon. In the second study, 71 members of Barquinha, an ayahuasca religion found in the city of Rio Branco, were compared to an urban group of 59 participants who did not drink ayahuasca. These studies included follow-up assessments at one year. The research concluded that the ayahuasca-using group scored significantly lower in the measures designed to determine issues with medical health, alcohol use, and psychiatric issues. Ayahuasca users scored in the normal range on personality tests and also scored significantly higher on a test to measure spiritual orientation and purpose of life, reflecting the value of transcendence found in these traditions.

The most notable aspect of this research was the absence of any indication of neurological impairment after decades of regular ritual ayahuasca use, as measured by tests of executive functions and memory. In fact, members of the ayahuasca-using groups scored higher than the control groups on some of these tests, indicating a lack of the functional impairments characteristic of neurotoxicity. The results suggest that ritual use of ayahuasca does not create the psychological or neurological problems that are normally associated with the problematic use of certain drugs. Considering the goals of the MAPS conference, this could be the most important presentation in the entire track. Not only did the research team present systematic data using matched control groups on a large cohort of long-term ayahuasca users, this presentation was also important because it actually announced new research findings. These findings have implications regarding the relationship of ayahuasca to mental health and the possible therapeutic potential of ayahuasca. Shortly after the conference ended, part of this research appeared in *Drug and Alcohol Dependence* (Fábregas et al., 2010); a series of articles based on this research will follow in other academic journals.

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