

AN UNUSUAL EXPERIENCE WITH "HOASCA" - A Lesson from the Teacher

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Years ago, while conducting fieldwork in the Peruvian Amazon as a graduate student, I had on several occasions sampled the psychedelic drink ayahuasca under the watchful eyes of mestizo ayahuasqueros. For some reason, however, these early experiences were less than satisfying.

A combination of circumstances, including the variable and often weak composition of local brews, a tendency on the part of the presiding shaman to under-dose Gringo participants, and my own uptight hyper-vigilance, a defensive posture reflecting my precarious situation as a stranger in a distinctly strange land, had all conspired to keep me from connecting with the ayahuasca experience in Peru except in the mildest and most superficial manner.

I did not really experience the true profundity of the ayahuasca vision until years later, when I attended a conference hosted by the Uniao do Vegetal, the Brazilian syncretic religious group that uses ayahuasca ritually in their ceremonies, under the name "hoasca," "vegetal," or "cha" (tea). In 1991, the medical studies group of the UDV organised a scientific conference on hoasca, which was held at a summer retreat a few miles outside of Sao Paulo, adjacent to the circular, church-like temple which served as a community and ceremonial centre for one of the local UDV "nucleos" or congregations. A few years previously, I had published several papers on the ayahuasca research I had conducted in Peru in connection with my doctoral research. This work had come to the attention of the UDV and it was on the strength of this that they kindly extended an invitation to me to attend the Sao Paulo conference and give a talk on the results of my research. The conference was attended by about 500 people, most of them Brazilian members of the sect, but also a smattering of local and international outsiders, including physicians, psychiatrists, anthropologists, botanists, pharmacologists, and the like. There were about 20 North Americans invited and I was among these.

The conference started on a Tuesday and ended on a Saturday. After four days of lectures, slides, and much animated conversation, we were all well primed and eager to experience the hoasca beverage; a group session at the temple had been arranged for us on the final closing evening of the conference. This also corresponded with the regular schedule of the UDV, which customarily holds sessions on alternate Saturdays.

On the night in question, the weather was humid and balmy. In the gathering dusk, we all walked the short distance from the dormitories where we had been staying to the temple, about a quarter mile away nestled in a small valley. The regular members of the congregation, many of whom had attended the conference but most of whom had driven out from the city for the evening's ritual, had already taken their places in the temple, and were seated in comfortable reclining chairs arranged on terraces which completely encircled the interior of the temple. In the centre of the amphitheatre-like space, a long table was arranged, with chairs arrayed around it, and a picture of Mestre Gabriel, the founder and prophet of the religion, was hung beneath an arch-shaped structure decorated with the sun, moon, and stars at one end. Several gallons of hoasca tea, a brownish liquid the colour of coffee latté, was in a plastic juice dispenser placed on the table beneath the picture of Mestre Gabriel; beside it was a stack of paper picnic cups.

A special set of chairs had been reserved for the visiting delegation of foreign "dignitaries" along one of the terrace-like elevations close to the centre of the amphitheatre. We threaded our way among the members already seated and took our places in the reserved spot. The officiating mestre and his acolytes, mostly men but including several women, were already seated around the table. After everyone had gotten settled, the mestre in charge rose to start dispensing the brew, helped by a couple of his disciples. The members formed an orderly line (they all seemed to know just where and when to go and there was no confusion or need for direction) and one

by one, we filed down to stand before the mestre and be handed a paper cup containing our allotted draught; the size of the servings varied from person to person, and seemed to be measured according to body weight and the mestres assessing gaze; what other criteria were applied was not explained but one got the feeling that he was taking the measure of the soul and spirit of the supplicant standing before him as well as the body. Each person took the cup assigned to them and returned to stand in front of their chair, holding the cup. Once everyone had been served, the mestre gave a signal and all raised the cups to their lips and drained the bitter, foul-tasting beverage in two or three gulps. One of the Brazilian scientists standing beside me slipped me a small piece of dried ginger to chew to kill the aftertaste; I was grateful for the kind gesture.

Having drained their cups, everyone sat back in their comfortable webbed chairs. I kept hoping someone would turn off the glaring, buzzing, fluorescent lights overhead which were altogether too bright and quite annoying. They were to stay on during the entire evening, however. For about 45 minutes, everyone sat, wrapped in their own thoughts. Absolute silence reigned; in a hall of over 500 people you could have heard a pin drop. After this period, a few people began to get up and totter toward the bathrooms, as the nausea, a frequent side effect in the early stages, began to take hold. You could hear the sounds of people puking and shitting emanating from the communal bathrooms at the back of the building. About the same time, the mestre began singing a beautiful song, called a chamada, and though I could not understand the Portuguese words, the melody was quite moving. The sound of the heartfelt chamada mingling with the wrenching, gasping noises of people throwing up violently in the background made me smile at the incongruity, but no one else seemed to notice.

My own experience was not developing as I'd hoped. My stomach was queasy but not enough to send me to the bathroom and I felt restless and uncomfortable. I felt very little effect, except for some brief flashes of hypnagogia behind my closed eyes. I was disappointed; I had been hoping for more than a sub-threshold experience, and I didn't want to disappoint my hosts, who were concerned that their visitors should have a good experience and "get" it. When the mestre signaled that he was ready to give a second glass to anyone who wanted it, I was among the group of about a dozen Gringos that queued up in front of the table; apparently I was not the only one who was having a difficult time connecting with the spirit of the tea.

I took my second draught and settled back into my chair. It tasted, if possible, even worse than the first one had. Within a few minutes it became dear that this time, it was going to work. I began to feel the force of the hoasca course through my body, a feeling of energy passing from the base of my spine to the top of my head. It was like being borne upwards in a high-speed elevator. I was familiar with this state of sympathetic activation from previous mushroom experiences, and I welcomed the sensation as confirmation that the train was pulling out of the station.

The energised feeling and the sensation of rapid acceleration continued. It was much like mushrooms but seemed to be much stronger; I had the sense that this was one elevator it would be hard to exit from before reaching the top floor, wherever that might be. Random snippets of topics we had been discussing at the seminars in the previous days began to float into my consciousness. I remembered one seminar that had addressed the UDV's concept that the power of hoasca tea is a combination of "force" and "alight"; the "force" was supplied by the MAO-inhibiting Banisteriopsis vine, known as mariri in the local vernacular, while the light—the visionary, hypnagogic component—was derived from chacruna, the DMT-containing Psychotria admixture plant. I thought to myself what an apt characterisation this was; hoasca was definitely a combination of "force" and "alight" and at that moment I was well within the grip of the "force" and hoped that I was about to break out into "the light."

At the instant I had that thought, I heard a voice, seeming to come from behind my left shoulder. It said something like, "you wanna see force?? I'll show you force!" The question was clearly rhetorical, and I understood that I was about to experience something whether I wanted to or not. The next instant, I found myself changed into a disembodied point of view, suspended in space, thousands of miles over the Amazon basin. I could see the curvature of the earth, the stars beyond shown steadily against an inky backdrop, and far below I could see swirls and eddies of clouds over the basin, and the nerve-like tracery of vast river systems. From the centre

of the basin arose the World Tree, in the form of an enormous *Banisteriopsis* vine. It was twisted into a helical form and its flowering tops were just below my disembodied viewpoint, its base was anchored to the earth far below, lost to vision in the depths of mist and clouds and distance that stretched beneath me. As I gazed, awestruck, at this vision, the voice explained that the Amazon was the Omphalos of the planet, and that the twisted, rope-like Yggdrasil/Mariri World Tree was the linchpin that tied the three realms—the underworld, the earth and the sky—together. Somehow I understood—though no words were involved—that the *Banisteriopsis* vine was the embodiment of the plant intelligence that embraced and covered the earth, that together the community of the plant species that existed on the earth provided the nurturing energy that made life on earth possible. I "understood" that photosynthesis—that neat trick, known only to green plants, of making complex organic compounds from sunlight, carbon dioxide, and water, was the "force" the UDV was talking about, and indeed was the force on which all life depends; I was reminded of a line from Dylan Thomas, that photosynthesis is "the force that through the green fuse, drives the flower."

In the next moment, I found myself instantly transported from my bodiless perch in space to the lightless depths beneath the surface of the earth. I had somehow become a sentient water molecule, percolating randomly through the soil, lost amid the tangle of the enormous root fibres of the *Banisteriopsis* World Tree. I could feel the coolness, the dank dampness of the soil surrounding me, I felt suspended in an enormous underground cistern, a single drop among billions of drops. This sensation lasted only a moment, then I felt a definite sense of movement, as, squeezed by the implacable force of irresistible osmotic pressures, I was rapidly translocated into the roots of the *Banisteriopsis* tree; the sense of the rising, speeding elevator returned except this time I was being lifted rapidly through the vast pipes and tubes of the plant's vascular system. I was a single molecule of water tumbling through the myriad branches and forks of the vertical maze, which grew progressively narrower the higher I went.

Finally, the sense of accelerating, vertical movement eased off; I was now floating freely, in a horizontal direction; no longer feeling pushed, I was suspended in the middle of a stream flowing through an enormous, vaulted tunnel. More than that, there was light at the end of the tunnel, a green light. With a start I realised that I had just passed through the petiole of a sun-drenched leaf, and was being shunted into progressively narrowing arteries as I was carried through the articulating veins toward some unknown destination. It helped that the voice—or my own narrative self, I'm not sure which—was providing occasional commentary on the stages of the journey as it unfolded.

Desperately, I tried to remember my old lessons in plant physiology and anatomy; by this time I had been given the wordless understanding that I was about to witness, indeed, participate in, the central mystery of life on earth; a water molecule's eye view of the process of photosynthesis. Suddenly I was no longer suspended in the arterial stream of the leaf vein; I had somehow been transported into an enormous enclosed space, suffused with greenish light. Above me I could see the domed, vaulted roof of the structure I was inside of, and I understood that I was inside a chloroplast; the roof was translucent and beams of sunlight streamed through it like a bedroom window on a bright morning. In front of me were flat, layered structures looking like folded sheets stacked closely together, covered with antenna-shaped structures, all facing in the same direction and all opened eagerly to receive the incoming light. I realised that these had to be the thylakoid membranes, the organelles within the chloroplast where the so-called "light reaction" takes place. The antenna-like structures covering them literally glowed and hummed with photonic energy, and I could see that somehow, this energy was being translocated through the membranes of the thylakoids they were mounted on. I recognised, or "understood" that these antenna-like arrays were molecules of chlorophyll, and the "anchors" that tied them to their membrane substrates were long tails of phytic acid that functioned as energy transducers, funneling the light energy collected by the flower-shaped receptors through the membrane and into the layers beneath it.

Next thing I knew I was beneath that membrane; I was being carried along as though borne on a conveyor belt; I could see the phytic acid chains dangling above and beyond them, through the semi-transparent "roof" of the membrane, the flower-like porphyrin groups that formed the chlorophyll's light-gathering apparatus loomed like the dishes of a radio telescope array. In the centre of the space was what looked like a mottled flat surface, periodically being smited by

enormous bolts of energy which emanated, lightning-like, from the phytic acid tails suspended above it; and on that altar, water molecules were being smashed to smithereens by the energy bolts. Consciousness exploded and died in a spasm of electron ecstasy as I was smited by the bolt of energy emitted by the phytic acid transducers and my poor water-molecule soul was split asunder. As the light energy was used to ionise the water, the oxygen liberated in the process rose with a shriek to escape from the chamber of horrors, while the electrons, liberated from their matrix, were shunted into the electron-transport roller coaster, sliding down the chain of cytochromes like a dancer being passed from partner to partner, into the waiting arms of Photosystem I, only to be blasted again by yet another photonic charge, bounced into the close but fleeting embrace of ferredoxin, the primary electron acceptor, ultimately captured by NADP⁺, to be used as bait to capture two elusive protons, as a flame draws a moth. Suddenly I was outside the flattened thylakoid structures, which from my perspective looked like high-rise, circular apartment buildings. I recognised that I was suspended in the stroma, the region outside the thylakoid membranes, where the mysterious Dark Reaction takes place, the alchemical wedding that joins carbon dioxide to ribulose diphosphate, a shotgun marriage presided over by ribulose diphosphate carboxylase, the first enzyme in the so-called pentose phosphate shunt. All was quiet and for a moment, I was floating free in darkness; then miraculously, (miracles were by this time mundane) I realised that my disembodied point of view had been reincarnated again, and was now embedded in the matrix of the newly reduced ribulose diphosphate/carbon dioxide complex; this unstable intermediate was rapidly falling apart into two molecules of phosphoglycerate which were grabbed and loaded on the merry-go-round by the first enzymes of the Calvin cycle. Dimly, I struggled to remember my early botany lessons and put names to what I was seeing.

I recognised that I had entered the first phases of the pentose phosphate shunt, the biochemical pathway that builds the initial products of photosynthesis into complex sugars and sends them spinning from thence into the myriad pathways of biosynthesis that ultimately generate the molecular stuff of life.

I felt humbled, shaken, exhausted and exalted all at the same time; suddenly I was ripped out of my molecular roller coaster ride, my disembodied eye was again suspended high over the Amazon basin. This time, there was no world tree arising from its centre. It looked much like it must look from a space shuttle or a satellite in high orbit. The day was sunny, the vista stretching to the curved horizon was blue and green and bluish green, the vegetation below, threaded with shining rivers, looked like green mold covering an overgrown petri plate. Suddenly I was wracked with a sense of overwhelming sadness, sadness mixed with fear for the delicate balance of life on this planet, the fragile processes that drive and sustain life, sadness for the fate of our planet and its precious cargo. "What will happen if we destroy the Amazon," I thought to myself, what will become of us, what will become of life itself, if we allow this destruction to continue? We cannot let this happen. It must be stopped, at any cost." I was weeping. I felt miserable, I felt anger and rage toward my own rapacious, destructive species, scarcely aware of its own devastating power, a species that cares little about the swath of destruction it leaves in its wake as it thoughtlessly decimates ecosystems and burns thousands of acres of rain forest. I was filled with loathing and shame.

Suddenly again from behind my left shoulder, came a quiet voice. "You monkeys only think you're running things," it said. "You don't think we would really allow this to happen, do you?" and somehow, I knew that the awe in that statement was the entire community of species that constitute the planetary biosphere. I knew that I had been given an inestimable gift, a piece of gnosis and wisdom straight from the heart/mind of planetary intelligence, conveyed in visions and thought by an infinitely wise, incredibly ancient, and enormously compassionate "ambassador" to the human community. A sense of relief, tempered with hope, washed over me. The vision faded, and I opened my eyes, to see my new found friends and hosts all eagerly gathered around me. The ceremony had officially ended a few minutes previously, I had been utterly oblivious to whatever was going on in the world beyond my closed eyelids. "How was it?" they wanted to know. "Did you feel the borrachera (drunkenness)?" I smiled to myself, feeling overjoyed at the prospect of sharing the experience and knowing that I had indeed been allowed to experience the ultimate "force," the vastly alien, incredibly complex molecular machine that is "the force that through the green fuse, drives the flower."