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## **Entheogenic Healing: The Spiritual Effects And Therapeutic Potential Of Ceremonial Ayahuasca Use**

Kenneth W. Tupper  
Ph.D. Candidate  
Department of Educational Studies  
University of British Columbia  
[www.kentupper.com](http://www.kentupper.com)

**[p. 269]** The overlap between the fields of health and spirituality is well illustrated by traditions of entheogenic healing, and in particular the transnational sociological trend of ceremonial ayahuasca drinking. Entheogenic healing is a concept that derives from the term “entheogen,” coined by scholars to convey the sacramental nature of traditional shamanic practices using psychoactive plants (Ruck, Bigwood, Staples, Ott, & Wasson, 1979). Ayahuasca is a decoction characteristically prepared from a boiled mash of a jungle liana (*Banisteriopsis caapi*) and a common admixture leaf (*Psychotria viridis*). The unique pharmacological synergy between particular chemicals in these plants produces a profound altered state of consciousness in humans. Ayahuasca is most commonly consumed in ritual contexts, both in traditional Amazonian indigenous practices and, of late, in various (post)modern syncretistic spiritual or hybrid healing practices. This chapter briefly reviews the renaissance of interest in the potential therapeutic value of substances known as psychedelics or entheogens<sup>1</sup>, and explores the concept of entheogenic healing with examples from various forms of ayahuasca

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<sup>1</sup> Hallucinogen, psychedelic and entheogen are three of the names for the class of psychoactive substances in which the discipline of modern medical science categorizes ayahuasca (or, more prototypically, LSD). Although they are often used to denote the same class of substances, their precise meanings are not synonymous, however, as they informed by different discourses (medical, popular and anthropological, respectively).

drinking. It covers traditional and modern practices of using ayahuasca in ritual contexts—including indigenous Amazonian traditions and more modern hybrid forms, such as syncretistic Brazilian ayahuasca churches—to diagnose and treat illnesses. It considers the importance of ritual, especially the element of music, for ayahuasca healing. Finally, it looks at addiction as a type of psychospiritual illness for which entheogenic healing with ayahuasca may be particularly well suited.

### **[p. 270] Psychedelic Medicine and Entheogenic Healing**

In the 1950s, a revolution in psychiatry took place that heralded a new era of understanding mental illness as a biological phenomenon and a research program to discover pharmacological treatments for previously intractable mental disorders (Healy, 2002). Among the drugs that were held to have considerable promise were chemicals that became known as “hallucinogens” or psychedelics. By the mid-1960s, early clinical investigations into these novel compounds had yielded positive results for some patients, and psychedelic medicine was widely regarded as a promising branch of psychiatry (Abramson, 1967; Dyck, 2008). However, so-called countercultural drug use trends among young people in the late 1960s and 1970s provoked public and political reactions that resulted in strict prohibitions on any kind of use of these substances or their natural plant forms, making even controlled scientific research impossible and putting psychedelic medicine into a period of quiescence for over two decades, (Sessa, 2005). In the 1990s, the curiosity of a small number of maverick researchers about substances such as dimethyltryptamine (DMT) and psilocybin led to a renaissance in psychedelic research on humans that continues to gather legitimacy and momentum today. For example, organizations such as the Multidisciplinary Association for Psychedelic Studies (MAPS) and the Heffter Research Institute actively promote and fund research programs that adhere to rigorous scientific methodology.

Psychedelic medicine may be broadly defined as the therapeutic use of a pharmacological agent from the class of substances that includes: lysergic acid diethylamide, or LSD; peyote cactus, or its alkaloidal constituent mescaline; psilocybin or mushrooms that contain it; and DMT or harmala alkaloid/DMT combinations,

constituents of ayahuasca (Winkelman & Roberts, 2007). Medical uses of other substances that are pharmacologically different from the “classical” psychedelics just listed—such as ketamine or methylenedioxymethamphetamine (MDMA)—are sometimes included in the category of psychedelic medicine. The therapeutic context of psychedelic medicine—both in the 1950s and 1960s, when the use of these substances was first being explored, and in recently revived research programs—is generally a clinical setting operating within the paradigm of western psychotherapy. Examples of the kinds of illnesses for which researchers are investigating medical treatments with psychedelic substances include addiction, obsessive compulsive disorder, cluster headaches, depression, palliative care, and post-traumatic stress disorder (for specific examples, see: [www.maps.org/research](http://www.maps.org/research)).

While psychedelic medicine offers the potential of new pharmacological treatments for a range of illnesses, much of the current research underway in this field is grounded in the paradigm of scientific biomedicine. As such, [p. 271] explanatory emphasis for the efficacy of a pharmacological treatment is put on biochemical activity and a clinical context that adheres to norms of modern Western conventional medicine (Porter, 1997). By contrast, some of the substances used in psychedelic medicine come from plants that have an older history of therapeutic use, in cultural traditions that long predate the Enlightenment and its emphasis on materialist understandings of the body. In these ancient healing practices, the consumption of a drug and experience of its effects occur more often than not within an explicit ritual context, and posits spiritual explanations for therapeutic benefits. This kind of spiritually-oriented therapeutic practice may be distinguished from the more general category of psychedelic medicine by the term “entheogenic healing,” a concept that will be elucidated through the rest of this chapter with the example of ceremonial ayahuasca use.

### **Ayahuasca and Shamanic Traditions**

Ayahuasca is an integral part of the shamanic healing practices of numerous Amazonian indigenous peoples. Its widespread use throughout the Amazon Basin and the variety of names for the brew suggest that its use long predates the arrival of Europeans (Luna,

1986). The word “ayahuasca” comes from the Quechua language, deriving etymologically from the roots *aya* (spirit or soul) and *huasca* (vine). It refers specifically to the Amazonian jungle liana *Banisteriopsis caapi*, but also to a decoction prepared from this plant, which contains the psychoactive alkaloids harmine and tetrahydroharmine (Ott, 1996). In Amazonian indigenous traditions, the ayahuasca brew may be prepared with a number of other admixture plants, but one of the most common is *Psychotria viridis*, the leaves of which contain the alkaloid DMT (Pinkley, 1969). DMT also exists endogenously in the human brain and is normally rapidly broken down through metabolic processes in the gut and the brain (Barker, Monti & Christian, 1981; Strassman & Qualls, 1994). However, when taken in combination with harmala alkaloids, DMT is not immediately metabolized and thus able enter the bloodstream and ultimately the brain, producing the characteristic altered state of consciousness of ayahuasca. The brew is remarkable not only for its unique pharmacology, but for the visions, auditions and ideations it inspires, which often have a transcendent, mystical or spiritual dimension (Shanon, 2002).

The scientific explanation for ayahuasca’s psychological effects contrasts with the animistic beliefs of Amazonian indigenous peoples whose cultural systems are informed by extensive experience with the brew. In the mestizo traditions of Peru, *ayahuasqueros* (i.e. *curanderos* or healers who specialize in the ritual use of ayahuasca) hold that certain kinds of flora—known as “master” plants—possess spirits that can communicate with humans. Ayahuasca is discursively constructed not as a drug in the modern sense of the word, but **[p. 272]** as a plant teacher: it is imbued with agency and a capacity to relay knowledge and information from realms beyond ordinary ken (Luna, 1984; Tupper, 2002). Drinking ayahuasca is a venerated means by which a shaman can, among other things, learn the whereabouts of enemies, prepare for hunting or other expeditions, and determine the cause of and effect a cure for disease (Dobkin de Rios, 1984). Thus, ayahuasca is also understood to be a medicine, although in a cultural context in which folk beliefs about aetiology often emphasize magic, witchcraft and sorcery. The superlative diagnostic and curative benefits of ayahuasca are thus

attributed not to pharmacological properties of the brew's constituent plants, but to supernatural forces mediated by the plant spirits.

In traditional Amazonian medicine, there are a number of important psychoactive plants in the shaman's pharmacopeia, including *Nicotiana tabacum* (*mapacho* or tobacco), *Brugmansia suaveolens* (*toé* or Angel's Trumpet), and *Erythroxylum coca* (coca); however, ayahuasca is among the most highly valued. The brew is invariably consumed in a ritual context, with strict dietary and behavioural protocols (e.g. sexual abstinence) demanded of participants. In some traditional practices, ayahuasca is used primarily for diagnosis of an illness, with the healer (or *ayahuasquero*), but not the patient, drinking the brew (Brown, 1986). The visions of the shaman will tell whether the patient is afflicted by a natural illness, in which case he or she may be referred to a Western doctor, or a supernatural one, in which case the shaman will attempt to remove "magic darts" projected by a malevolent sorcerer. In other cases, ayahuasca is drunk in a group ceremony by both the shaman and the patients, creating an opportunity for healing in a communal setting. One ethnographer notes that ayahuasca "provides the entire community access to transcendental experiences and thereby has integrative and cohesive functions for the society" (Andritzky, 1989, p. 87).

### **Modern Uses of Ayahuasca**

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, ayahuasca began to be used outside traditional indigenous contexts in countries like Brazil, where the brew became integral to the spiritual practices of new syncretistic religious movements. Groups such as the Santo Daime, Barquinha, and União do Vegetal have incorporated elements of African spiritualism, esoteric mysticism, Christian liturgy, and indigenous traditions to create new ayahuasca drinking practices that expanded to urban Brazilian contexts in the 1970s (Labate, 2006). These and other uses of ayahuasca—such as *vegetalismo* in the Peruvian mestizo tradition (described below) and hybrid forms that combine elements of shamanism, psychotherapy and other alternative healing practices—have been part of the globalization of the brew in the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries (Tupper, 2008).

Although regarded primarily as a sacrament in the Brazilian churches, ayahuasca is also seen as a potent force for healing. Indeed, as with indigenous [p. 273] cultural traditions in the Amazon and other parts of the world, the artificial dichotomy between health and spirituality evident in discourses of modernity is not evident in the practices of the Brazilian ayahuasca churches. The Santo Daime is the oldest of the Brazilian ayahuasca religions, founded in the 1930s in the Brazilian Amazonian state of Acre, where a rubber tapper, Raimundo Irineu Serra (or Mestre Irineu), encountered ayahuasca while working among indigenous communities in the rain forest (Meyer, 2003). Through the middle part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Santo Daime solidified its ceremonial practices, the various rituals for the preparation and use of the sacrament, and core spiritual doctrines, mostly through the codification of collections of hymns “received” by central church members and sung during rituals (MacRae, 2004). After Irineu died in 1971, the Santo Daime continued in several different ecclesiastical lines, including the *Centro Eclético Fluente Luz Universal Raimundo Irineu Serra* (CEFLURIS), or Centre for the Eclectic Flow of the Divine Light. CEFLURIS was led by Padrinho Sebastião, a charismatic medium whose initial encounter with ayahuasca was a profound experience of both physical and spiritual healing. In the 1970s and 1980s, the CEFLURIS community welcomed newcomers seeking spiritual guidance or healing from other parts of Brazil and other countries (Polari de Alverga, 1999).

In the 1990s and early 21<sup>st</sup> century, the Santo Daime has been the vanguard of the transnational sociological phenomenon of ayahuasca drinking in other parts of the world, with established chapters in numerous countries. In Santo Daime traditions, ayahuasca is regarded as a holy sacrament, but may be used as a treatment for a variety of illnesses, with special healing *trabalhos* (“works,” or ceremonies) conducted for such purposes. Members of the Santo Daime also may also drink ayahuasca during pregnancy and labour, or as part of palliative care when death is imminent (Cemin, 2006; Schmidt, 2007).

Villaescusa (2002) researched the experiences of regular participants in Santo Daime ceremonies in London, England, to discover what psychotherapeutic processes may

have been facilitated by their use of ayahuasca in this setting. Subjects reported that their experiences with the tea were challenging but beneficial overall, providing insights into their physical, psychological, emotional and spiritual health. Most reported positive modifications in values and behaviour as a result of these insights, such as heightened acceptance and forgiveness of others, empathy, and gratitude, and healthy dietary or drug use changes. Villaescusa's (2002) findings suggest that ayahuasca use in the Santo Daime ritual context holds considerable promise as an adjunct to the psychotherapeutic process, demonstrating that the distinction between psychedelic medicine and entheogenic healing is by no means clear.

An early offshoot of the Santo Daime church was the Barquinha (Portuguese for “little boat”), a group established in 1945, also in the Brazilian state of Acre. The patriarch of the Barquinha, Daniel Pereira de Matos, was a former sailor (hence the nautical name) who welcomed people from the Rio Branco [p. 274] area to attend ayahuasca rituals for the treatment of a variety of ailments (MacRae, 2004). Today, the Barquinha has several established religious communities in Brazil and continues to emphasize the healing value of its rituals (Frenopoulo, 2006). One of the most important of these is weekly *Obras de Caridade* (“charity works”), which takes place on Saturday evenings. These special ceremonies are open for non-church members to attend, although these clients may elect not to drink ayahuasca for the therapeutic encounter (so in this respect, there are parallels between the Barquinha and *mestizo* ayahuasca healing). The Barquinha healing rituals focus on spirit possession and exorcism, whereby church members take on a role of mediumship to cast out the malevolent spirits believed to be the cause of patients' illnesses.

The *Centro Espírita Beneficente União do Vegetal* (Benevolent Spiritist Centre Union of the Vegetable, or UDV) is the other primary ayahuasca church in Brazil. The UDV was founded in 1961 by José Gabriel da Costa (or Mestre Gabriel to his followers), another Brazilian rubber tapper, who was introduced to “hoasca” in the Amazonian state of Rondônia (MacRae, 2004). In contrast to Santo Daime ceremonies, in which singing and dancing is often encouraged, UDV rituals are more staid affairs in which

participants sit, reflect and sometimes participate in question and answer sessions with church leaders. Its doctrines are relatively puritanical, emphasizing abstinence from tobacco, alcohol, unorthodox sexual behaviour, dancing, and attending the ceremonies of other ayahuasca religions (MacRae, 2004, p. 38).

Interestingly, the UDV is one of the few ayahuasca traditions that disavows medical or therapeutic uses of the brew. As Goulart (2006) reports, an official UDV church document “explicitly declares . . . that the Uniao do Vegetal does not preach any ‘healing properties of the brew’ and ‘does not practice or advocate acts of folk healing (*ações curandeiristas*)” (Centro Espírita Beneficente União do Vegetal qtd. in Goulart, 2006, p. 297). At the same time, however, the UDV actively promotes scientific research on ayahuasca and its effects on church members: “the concept of ‘science’ possesses a central place in UDV cosmology, appearing in rituals, in the doctrine, in mystical elements and, generally, in the speech and behavior of members” (Goulart, 2006, p. 296). This attitude towards science by the UDV was solidified through expansion of church membership to urban middle-class followers, who brought relative education and affluence to the church and an interest in legitimizing its sacrament with respect to the medical research establishment.

The Hoasca Project is probably the most salient example of the UDV’s participation in the scientific investigation of ayahuasca, an interdisciplinary research project that— notwithstanding the absence of healing motivations in church doctrine—demonstrated outcomes consistent with improved health and well-being of long-time ayahuasca-drinking church members. The Hoasca Project included a psychological assessment of church members who had been drinking ayahuasca regularly for more than ten years, including [p. 275] comparisons with matched control subjects who had never drunk ayahuasca (Grob, et al., 1996). The life stories of the UDV members revealed that most of them had had a variety of pervasive dysfunctional or unhealthy behaviours prior to their entry into the church. Seventy three percent had moderate to severe alcohol dependence before their first ayahuasca experience, and fifty three percent were regular tobacco smokers. All reported having discontinued any psychoactive substance use



outside of the ritualized ayahuasca sessions. Their description of their lives before the UDV included terms such as impulsive, disrespectful, angry, aggressive, oppositional, rebellious, irresponsible, alienated, and unsuccessful.

Members of the UDV in the Hoasca Project uniformly reported a transformational experience with their first ayahuasca session, a time which they saw as a critical turning point in their lives (Grob et al., 1996). Most reported a sense that their lives had been on a destructive track and that without a radical change in lifestyle they would end up unhappy, ruined, or dead. However, after becoming regular participants in UDV ayahuasca rituals, the subjects reported “sustained improvement in memory and concentration, persistent positive mood states, fulfillment in day-to-day interactions, and a sense of purpose, meaning, and coherence to their lives” (Grob, 1999, p. 241). The researchers do note that the specific ritual context in which ayahuasca is consumed by UDV members, combined with membership in a cohesive spiritual community, makes it difficult to ascertain how much of the improvement subjects reported can be attributed to the brew itself *per se*.

In addition to the sacramental (and often healing) uses of ayahuasca by the Brazilian churches described above, other modern uses emerged in countries such as Colombia, Ecuador and Peru in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and even more recently in places such as Europe and North America. The folk healing practices of *vegetalismo*, which incorporate the use of ayahuasca and other master plants for diagnosis and treatment of illnesses, have been documented by anthropologists in the Peruvian Amazon (Demange, 2002; Dobkin de Rios, 1972; Luna, 1986). Becoming a healer in the *vegetalismo* tradition involves a rigorous process of initiation and training, which requires following strict dietary and sexual abstinences and sometimes prolonged isolation in the forest. Illnesses in the *mestizo* belief system are often understood to be caused by forest spirits, which can influence human affairs, or by the sorcery of rival shamans. The *ayahuasquero* will drink ayahuasca in the presence of the patient (who may or may not drink the brew as well) to determine the etiology and appropriate course of treatment. This information is communicated by the spirits of ayahuasca and other master plants, which are invoked

through the chanting of *icaros*, the melodies whistled or sung while under the influence of ayahuasca and believed to shape or modify the visions and teachings of the plant spirits. As with the Brazilian ayahuasca churches, the Santo Daime and the UDV, the healing practices of *vegetalismo* traditions have expanded [p. 276] beyond the Amazon and South America in recent years, with ayahuasca ceremonies conducted by itinerant shamans and neo-*ayahuasqueros* (i.e. non-indigenous practitioners) in the United States, Canada, other parts of South America, and Europe (Tupper, 2009).

### **Ritual and Music**

One of the common elements in ayahuasca drinking practices of both indigenous peoples and the Brazilian churches is the use of ritual in modulating the experience. Ritual is a universal human cultural practice that may have evolutionary neuropsychological roots (McClenon, 1997). The theory of biogenetic structuralism posits that ritual may have roots extending further than the origin of our hominid ancestors. According to this theory, ritual behaviour is “a subset of formalized behavior that involves two or more individuals in active and reciprocal communication and that (1) is structured; (2) is stereotyped and repetitive in occurrence over time; and (3) results in greater coordination of conspecifics toward some social action, purpose, or goal” (d’Aquili, Laughlin & McManus, 1979). In humans, ritual may serve to stimulate the parasympathetic components of the central nervous system and lower (i.e., primeval) brain mechanisms (Winkelman, 2000). For example, ritual can affect neural mechanisms—such as the temporal lobe—in a way that, empirical evidence suggests, is correlated with mystical or religious experience (Newberg, D’Aquili, & Rause, 2001). Presumably early adepts with technologies of ecstasy, such as ingesting ayahuasca or other psychoactive plants, learned the importance of ritual as a means of controlling or directing the powerful experiences they produce.

The explicit ritual approach inherent in entheogenic healing is one of its primary distinctions with psychedelic medicine. Metzner (1998) acknowledges some similarities between psychedelic medicine sessions done in a clinical context and entheogenic healing done in a ceremonial context: they both emphasize the need for an experienced

leader or guide, and they both hold set (i.e. intention) and setting to be of primary importance. However, Metzner (1998) also identifies several significant differences between the two. First, the underlying explanatory paradigms of etiology, or the causes of illness, and cure for each are quite different. Practitioners of psychedelic medicine take a psychotherapeutic approach to treatment, using the drug experience to elicit unconscious material during the session;entheogenic healers, on the other hand, often consider illness to be a manifestation of supernatural imbalance and draw upon spiritual forces to effect cures. Second, in shamanic entheogenic ceremonies there is little or no talking among the participants, whereas psychedelic medicine often involves considerable discursive interaction between the therapist and client. Third, traditional entheogenic ceremonies are usually done in low light or darkness, which [p. 277] allows one to experience more vivid visions, regarded as integral to the healing process. Finally, singing or chanting is invariably a fundamental aspect of entheogenic healing rituals, as the rhythms and melodies support the flow of visions and provide a kind of psychospiritual anchor for participants.

The therapeutic value of music is important to consider in relation to ayahuasca healing and spirituality, as singing and chanting is an integral aspect of most kinds of ritualized use of ayahuasca. For indigenous Amazonian peoples, as one ethnographer relates, “ayahuasca songs come directly from the spirits and are difficult to translate or interpret, as they contain much onomatopoeic, archaic, and nonordinary language. Not fully intelligible in ordinary consciousness, they derive their power from their acoustic properties augmented by hallucinogenic trance” (Shepherd, 2004, p. 257). In the folk healing practices of Peruvian *vegetalismo*, the singing of *icaros* (traditional melodies whistled, chanted or sung while under the influence of ayahuasca) occurs throughout most of the ayahuasca ceremony (Katz and Dobkin de Rios, 1971; Luna, 1986). The *icaros* create synaesthetic connections between song melodies and tempos and the ayahuasca visions are believed to allow communication with the spiritual realm. *Icaros* are composed or learnt when the apprenticing healer follows strict dietary and behavioural restrictions in extended periods of isolation. To *ayahuasqueros*, *icaros* are

channeled through or divinely inspired by the spirits of the plants with which they work, and are an integral aspect of ayahuasca healing in this context (Demange, 2002).

Music is also an important aspect of most Santo Daime rituals, in which *hinos* or hymns are sung in unison by church members while under the effects of the *daime* (their term for ayahuasca). As with the *icaros* in indigenous ayahuasca healing, the *hinos* of the Santo Daime shape or modify the visions generated by the brew and provide an anchor when ayahuasca's effects are strong or disorienting (as they often can be). For example, a long-time Santo Daime church leader relates of one of his early experiences at a Saint John's Day ritual (June 23, around winter solstice in the summer hemisphere, and one of the regular observances in the Santo Daime calendar): "The hymns kept guiding my understanding and saved me during the hardest moments" (Polari de Alverga, 1999, p. 58). However, the lyrics of the Santo Daime's *hinos* are also one of the primary ways church doctrine is passed along. In this light, an excerpt from one common hymn shows how intertwined the notions of spirituality and health are in the Santo Daime worldview:

Whenever you become ill  
 And Daime is what you drink  
 Remember the Deity  
 That healed you and made you think

(excerpt from Santo Daime hymn received by Sebastião Mota de Melo, translated by Stephen F. White, qtd. in Luna & White, 2000, p. 139)

**[p. 278]** This hymn was received by one of the Santo Daime's more prominent spiritual leaders, Padrinho Sebastião. Again, as with indigenous ayahuasca traditions, songs are understood not to be composed, but rather channelled, inspired directly by the spiritual forces made manifest through drinking the brew. In some respects, the therapeutic benefits of ayahuasca may be understood to be in the music as much as in the brew itself, a notion entirely consistent with the recognized value of music therapy in its own right (Kenny, 1982).

## Addiction Treatment

The relationship between spirituality and health is perhaps most apparent in addictive disorders, including substance dependence and other consumptive behaviours that may preoccupy individuals in a pathological way. It is thus no surprise that addiction treatment may be one of the most promising applications of entheogenic healing through ceremonial ayahuasca use. This indication for ayahuasca follows an early path in the history of psychedelic medicine, when in the 1950s and 1960s LSD was used successfully to treat alcoholism (Abramson, 1967). Similar work has been done more recently with other psychedelic substances, such as ketamine and ibogaine (Alper, Lotsof & Kaplan, 2007; Krupitsky et al., 2002). However, unlike the overtly pharmacological or psychotherapeutic approach taken in psychedelic medicine, entheogenic healing with through ceremonial ayahuasca use implicitly acknowledges the spiritual dimension of addictions.

Canadian psychologist Dr. Bruce Alexander (2008) has recently outlined a comprehensive theory of addiction that provides another useful framework through which to consider why ayahuasca (or other entheogens) may be useful addiction treatments. According to Alexander, addiction is “neither a medical nor a criminal problem” (2008, p. 68); rather, he posits that addiction is an adaptive response to the dislocation, or lack of psychosocial integration, experienced by many people—both rich and poor—struggling to find meaning in the unforgiving free-market global economic realities of today’s world. Another way of understanding dislocation, as the subtitle of Alexander’s book suggests—*The Globalisation of Addiction: A Study in the Poverty of Spirit* (2008)—is as a spiritual void that addictive behaviours are an attempt to fill. Although Alexander suggests that systemic political and economic changes are necessary to address the causes of addiction, his theory supports the hypothesis that ayahuasca or other entheogens may help individuals by catalyzing mystical or otherwise meaningful (and thus therapeutic) experiences.

One of the more prominent practitioners of and advocates for using ayahuasca to treat addictions is Dr. Jacques Mabit, who operates Takiwasi, a clinic for drug and alcohol

addiction in Tarapoto, Peru. Although trained [p. 279] as a physician in the traditions of Western biomedicine, Mabit works with substance-dependent patients in the traditional ceremonial ayahuasca healing practices of Peru (Mabit, 1996). Like Alexander, Mabit (2007) argues that addiction is a function of the modern secular human condition, a state of perpetual spiritual emptiness that compels many to seek happiness through habitual consumption of drugs or other mind-numbing activities such as gambling, sex, television, or shopping. Ayahuasca holds the promise of being a metaphysical antidote to such existential anguish by confronting patients with the possible spiritual reasons for their addictive behaviours and providing an impetus to change. In this way, using ayahuasca to treat addiction accords with the Winkelman's (2001) argument that shamanic practices of consciousness alteration generally might be beneficial as components of programs treating substance dependence.

Along similar lines, Dobkin de Rios, Grob and Baker (2005) put forth a model of redemption as an explanation for how entheogens such as ayahuasca might be useful in the treatment of addiction. Redemption, as they use the term, refers to both secular and spiritual ways individuals who have transgressed social mores can reintegrate themselves into their community, "a process which entails freeing someone or something from a less than desirable state and bringing or restoring them to a desired state" (p. 241). They propose that psychoactive substances such as ayahuasca, used in socially-sanctioned ritual contexts, may be a spiritual pathway for similar redemptive changes in drug-dependent individuals. Among the examples they offer in support of their argument are the changes reported by UDV members who changed their destructive patterns of drug use after being introduced to a community that uses ayahuasca ceremonially (Grob, et al., 1996).

## **Conclusion**

New understandings of the role spirituality can play in human health and well-being are contributing to a renewed interest in psychedelic medicine (Winkelman & Roberts, 2007). Although not explicitly spiritual in its approach, the clinical use of psychedelics in a secular context may induce profound and deeply meaningful spiritual experiences

(Griffiths, Richards, McCann, & Jesse, 2006; Griffiths, Richards, Johnson, McCann, & Jesse, 2008). However, the synergy between health and spirituality is more directly apparent in the practices of entheogenic healing, which adopt a formal ritual context for using plants such as ayahuasca to treat illness and disease. This approach to healing is well exemplified in various kinds of ayahuasca drinking practices, such as those of Amazonian indigenous and *mestizo* traditions and more modern syncretistic religious practices of Brazilian ayahuasca churches such as the Santo Daime and Barquinha. The growing international interest in ayahuasca and [p. 280] entheogenic healing reflects a recognition and affirmation of the cultural importance of the traditional use of psychoactive plants in a time of increasing religious pluralism. With the renaissance of academic interest in psychedelics and entheogens, it may not be long before psychedelic medicine and entheogenic healing are accepted as valid, even valuable, therapeutic interventions.

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