CHAPTER 6
ORIGINS

Successive generations of European anthropologists encountered ayahuasca in the 20th century, making it a subject for investigation and scholarship. Even so, after decades of investigation many basic questions remain unanswered. For example, we don't know how jungle communities originally learned how to make the ayahuasca brew. We also don't know how long ago the indigenous people found that the admixture of the vine and the leaf, cooked together, would produce such potent visionary effects.

There are more than 40,000 plants catalogued in the Amazon rainforest. Considering this, it's hard to imagine that anyone – no matter how attuned to the sensuous undercurrents of the forest and its magic – would have thought to combine together a DMT-containing plant with the ayahuasca vine. It seems far outside the realm of luck or improvisation. The DMT in *chacruna* is only psychoactive when taken along with an MAOI-containing plant such as *B. caapi.* The ayahuasca brew requires many hours to prepare as well as the addition of an acidifying element to reach the proper pH balance. Was the discovery of this brew a gift, a lucky accident, or a testament to the mastery of rainforest science?

According to some legends, the ayahuasca vine visited rainforest shamans in their dreams, giving them instruction on how to prepare it. Quechua lore has it that the jaguar, once seen drunkenly stumbling and staring into space after chewing on the *caapi* lianas, is responsible for revealing to humans the psychoactive effect of ayahuasca. For the Asháninka community and others, it's said to be a gift from their creator god (rainforest communities can be both pantheistic and monotheistic without finding any inherent contradiction between these ideas).

Indigenous people possess levels of botanical sensitivity that are beyond our scientific understanding. Richard Schultes, for example, found that the rainforest shamans were able to immediately recognize and categorize different kinds of ayahuasca based on their particular effects in ceremony. Even though he was a trained botanist, he could find no visible difference between the specimens.

According to Dennis McKenna in his essay "Ayahuasca: An Ethnophamacologic History", published in Ralph Metzner's *The Ayahuasca Experience* (2014): "There is nothing in the form of iconographic materials or preserved botanical remains that would unequivocally establish the prehistoric use of ayahuasca." Across the global community of *ayahuasqueros* and neo-shamans, it is commonly supposed that indigenous people consumed the ayahuasca potion in the same way for untold centuries.

In *The Cosmic Serpent*, Jeremy Narby wrote that Amazonian communities practised ayahuasca shamanism "without interruption for at least five thousand years". Dennis McKenna believed that ayahuasca had been imbibed for "millennia of coevolution". Benny Shanon, in *The Antipodes of the Mind*, supposes ayahuasca "has long been a key constituent of culture" in the Amazon basin. "Indeed, it appears that the indigenous people of this region have used the brew for millennia." Yet this is only speculation.

The presumed ancient provenance somehow adds significance and value to its continued and ongoing use. Europeans and North Americans tend to see ayahuasca and Amazonian curanderismo as an ancient, archaic and primitive practice - and thus a pure and "uncorrupted" tradition. Contemporary first-generation drinkers believe that the ancient pedigree of the medicine gives it authenticity, authority and special significance.

Underpinning these assumptions is the implicit belief that indigenous cultures are unchanging and primordial – that, somehow, they've been unscathed by the tides of time, despite the rise and fall of empires, environmental changes and social dynamics we may not understand as of yet. Part of the reason for this is that indigenous communities, until recently, transferred all of their knowledge and history orally.

Pervasive in Western culture is the implicit belief that indigenous cultures are more static, less innovative and adaptive, than our own. At the same time, the presumed ancient pedigree of the medicine somehow gives it authenticity, authority and significance. It is an interesting thought experiment to challenge such assumptions or at least explore their foundations. Some anthropologists are currently questioning the romantic ahistoricism that surrounds ayahuasca and other Amazonian shamanic practices. The untested belief that ayahuasca shamanism is a static

practice may create a distorted view of indigenous cultural histories. Many modern Westerners want these cultures to be unsullied, unchanging, pure, and natural – that way, they provide a clear antithesis or antidote to our own society.

Stephan Beyer, author of *Singing to the Plants* (2009), finds no mention of the modern ayahuasca brew before the 18th century – by European colonialists or by previous Empires. He reviews circumstantial evidence such as the lack of any reference to ayahuasca in the detailed records of the Inca Empire, which conquered much of modern-day Peru and Ecuador in the 14th century:

> By the late 1400s the Inca Empire, under the Supreme Inca Pachacuti, had reached Ecuador, and presumably would have encountered the ayahuasca drink had it been in use there. The Incas had acute observational skills and a keen interest in plants, their growing conditions, and their local uses, yet there is no Inca material that shows familiarity with anything like either the ayahuasca vine or the ayahuasca drink, and there is no sign of ayahuasca use or the memory of its use among highland Indians.

Early European chroniclers were fascinated by the indigenous use of psychoactive plants, although mainly to denigrate them as the devil's tools. In 1571, the Spanish explorer Polo de Ondergardo recorded the use of *vilca*, a snuff containing tobacco and the crushed DMT-containing seeds of *Anadenanthera peregrina.* But there was no mention of the ayahuasca potion. In the 16th and 17th centuries, Beyer notes:

> Spanish missionary priests wrote vivid and horrified descriptions of the effects of snuffed DMT-containing *Anadenanthera*, as well as the snuffing and drinking of tobacco, but no similar accounts of ayahuasca.

We find early mentions in the chronicles of the Jesuit Franz Xavier Veigl (1768), who writes of the "so-called ayahuasca, which is a bitter reed, or more specifically, a liana. It serves for mystification and bewitchment". Yet this may refer to the vine alone, not the admixture. While we now see the Shipibo people as one of the central groups involved in the technical mastery of ayahuasca as a healing medicine, even 19th-century descriptions of Shipibo healing ceremonies don't mention the potion.

The anthropologists Bernd Brabec de Mori and Oscar Calavia Saéz, in their research into the medicine's origins, did not discover anything

to support the claims for ancient use of the DMT-containing ayahuasca brew. "Unfortunately, there is still no evidence found to back up the assumption that ayahuasca has been used since pre-Columbian times," writes Brabec de Mori in his essay "Tracing Hallucinations", published in the multi-author book *The Internationalization of Ayahuasca* (2011). He proposes that "ayahuasca shamanism" was only introduced to the Peruvian lowlands recently, probably by mestizo travelers in urban areas. Similarly, the Matsigenka and Asháninka knew of *B. caapi,* but only mixed it with the vision-inducing *P. viridis* within the past century, presumably learning how to do this from travellers. Beyer suggests:

> It becomes a plausible hypothesis that the ayahuasca drink – the combination of the ayahuasca vine with a DMT-containing companion plant – originated, not 5,000 years ago, but rather much more recently, perhaps in the seventeenth century.

Brabec de Mori develops a narrative of the medicine's path into the Western world, proposing that the combination of the vine and the leaf was "discovered by some Western Tukanoan people" and spread to the "Kichwa-speaking groups that emerged from Jesuit missions in the Ecuadorian and northwest Peruvian lowlands and among the Kukama". Calavia Saéz recounts stories from the 1920s in which the Kaxinawa Indians of Brazil attribute their knowledge of ayahuasca to the Yaminawá, in relatively recent times. Brabec de Mori proposes that the practice of drinking the ayahuasca potion (the vine plus the leaves) travelled in the late 19th century or early 20th century from the area around the Amazonian river city of Iquitos:

> It then crossed the Brazilian frontier into Acre, where Indians and *seringueiros* [rubber tappers] started to use the brew, before the Santo Daime church was founded in the 1930s. Groups which then remained isolated came in touch with ayahuasca only recently, that is, after their (renewed) contact to riverine societies.

As an ethnomusicologist as well as an anthropologist, Brabec de Mori studies the *icaros*, the shamanic chants and medicine songs used across the region. Part of his argument for ayahuasca's recent provenance rests on the tonal similarities of the *icaros* from different areas of the Amazon basin. He believes that, over a long period of time, each tribal group would have developed a unique musical approach:

> The musical structure of *icaro* is the only song structure compellingly similar between the Río Napo and the Río Urubamba … If ayahuasca would be in use for centuries or even millennia among the mentioned groups, as it is often assumed … it would appear rather illogical that especially the music connected to ayahuasca sessions would be the only music fairly similar among all the groups. … The only reasonable explanation for this phenomenon is that this music is rather new and was distributed among these groups from the same source.

But Brabec de Mori understates the differences in traditional *icaros* and chants. The whooping haunting atonal hums the Secoya sing in *yagé* nights bear little resemblance to the precise, melodious and methodical vibrations sung by Shipibo *onanya* (healers). Farther north in the Putumayo region, *taitas* (esteemed spiritual leaders and *yagé* servers) chant similarly to the Secoya, yet often adopt guitars and other instruments into their ceremonial spaces. Farther south in the outskirts of cities, ayahuasca songs have a more melodic structure, marked by a beginning, a middle, a chorus and an end – definitely due to occidental influences. The hymns sung in the illuminated halls of UDV or Santo Daime processions reveal the many historical layers of ayahuasca shamanism as it is practised across the Amazon.

Whenever exactly the vine and the leaves were first brewed to create the potion we know today, the dissemination of ayahuasca appears to have been a much more syncretic and modernist phenomenon than previously thought. Use of the medicine spread through new forms of contact between tribal groups. Ironically, these new comminglings were the result of colonialism, missionaries and rubber tapping concessions. Peyote, similarly, was originally used in a small area of the southwestern United States. It spread to many North American indigenous groups in the late 19th and 20th centuries, through the medium of the Native American Church.

There is something liberating about this counter-narrative, rejecting the ahistorical narrative that ayahuasca has been used in the same way for millennia. If this is the case, we no longer need to see current experimentation with ayahuasca as inherently wrong or an aberration, as long as the medicine is treated with respect. Instead, today's innovators experimenting with the medicine are not "apostates" or "heretics" rebelling against the presumed purity of an ancient lineage. They continue a dynamic process of discovery and exploration – probably in the same way that shamans, "technicians of the sacred," to use Mircea Eliade's term – always have. Overcoming the idea

02 CH6-9.indd 47 03/06/2019 16:44

of ayahuasca use as something fixed, ancient and pure, we can understand ayahuasca shamanism as a practice – an applied science – that continually changes as it evolves.

Beyer believes that the claims for ayahuasca's ancient provenance is, on the one hand, an attempt to legitimate ayahuasca use by invoking "the culturally resonant trope of a millennia-old indigenous wisdom". Westerners often imagine tribal people as ahistorical, "unchanging in their isolation and innocence". He believes that both reasons "malign the creativity, adaptability, and ingenuity of indigenous cultures".

The indigenous groups that use ayahuasca in the Amazon tend to leave no traces from the past. The forest quickly swallows any human-made objects back into its maw. The Secoya, for example, traditionally constructed their dwellings out of rainforest wood and vines. No residue or relic would remain, even a half-generation later. They may have drunk ayahuasca for 8,000 years – but there would be no remnant of this older than the last living elder's memory.

Even in the past 50 years, the typical contexts for drinking ayahuasca have changed significantly. In the ayahuasca ceremony most people know today, the shaman or *curandero* gives ayahuasca to 20 or so people (many of them strangers). They all drink it together. Then the *curandero* makes music, sings over them, and performs healings. As journalist Ariel Levy wrote in *The New Yorker* in 2016:

> Most people who take ayahuasca in the United States do so in small "ceremonies", led by an individual who may call himself a shaman, an *ayahuasquero*, a *curandero*, a *vegetalista*, or just a healer. This person may have come from generations of Shipibo or Quechua shamans in Peru, or he may just be someone with access to ayahuasca.

Generally, the drinkers sit still or lie down silently while the shaman presides over the ritual, protecting the space and looking after the participants.

While this modality has become common in the contemporary neo-shamanic world, it bears little resemblance to what was practised, for the most part, in the Amazon. Traditionally, in many cases, patients seeking healing through *curanderismo* would not be expected to drink ayahuasca or have visions themselves. The shaman would drink for them and seek to heal them while they were in the visionary trance.

As Calavia Saéz notes in "A Vine Network" in *The Internationalization of Ayahuasca*:

> … being cured through ayahuasca does not necessarily happen through an experience by the sick person. Normally the central experience in the healing process is made by the shaman, not the patient.

This is the reverse of current beliefs and practices. For example, Canadian physician Gabor Maté believes that ayahuasca cures by surfacing repressed emotions in the sick person. Many now think that ayahuasca's ability to heal psychological and even physical maladies is based on the insights and cathartic emotional experiences it induces in the patient. Yet this is a modern inversion of the traditional approach, in which the shaman would receive the visions and seek to transform and release negative energies for his or her patient.

If the increasingly widespread use of the DMT-containing ayahuasca potion is a relatively recent – even a modern phenomenon – then why do we presume it to be something ancient? Brabec de Mori believes this is based on an inherent bias in modern Western civilization. We "tend to connect 'old' with 'precious' and specifically 'indigenous,' and correspondingly, 'new' with 'invented, constructed, copied'." Western seekers raised in industrial, secular societies yearn to connect with an unsullied source of healing gnosis passed down through the ages.

At the same time, for researchers and scholars, Brabec notes in "Tracing Hallucinations":

> It makes a difference indeed whether we report to the public that we are investigating a hallucinogenic drug that was spread relatively recently through Catholic missions and by rainforest mestizos, or whether we report that we are researching a traditional remedy that has been used by forest Indians for at least five thousand years.

The postmodern spiritual culture of the West focuses on ayahuasca's healing powers, avoiding deeper layers of ambiguity, history, and in some cases, darkness. In older accounts, ayahuasca shows "a much more sinister property than the one that is attributed to it by the indianist new age," notes Calavia Saéz. It is often an "agent of witchcraft" as well as "a catalyzer for mundane war".

Calavia Saéz explores the oral history of the Yaminawá. In their tales, neighbouring groups would come together to drink ayahuasca. These reunions sometimes turned "into sudden and lethal confrontations … The *cipo* [Yaminawá word for ayahuasca] would perform some kind of

negative diplomacy by producing visions in which their fellow celebrants were revealed to be enemies". In other tales, ayahuasca "worked as a vehicle through which deceased relatives appear in order to demand that their family take revenge upon their slayer". The blood of the slain might be mixed into the potion to induce such visions.

Some rainforest communities integrated ayahuasca into vibrant rituals that involved dancing, celebration, as well as drinking alcohol (*caxiri*, beer made from manioc and palm wine) and consuming vast quantities of tobacco. These kinds of community rituals using the medicine have become a thing of the past across the Amazon, Calavia Saéz finds. "Commonly, there has been a progressive abandoning of collective use, whereas it continued or even increased in private use." Reasons for this may include the intensifying impact of colonialism and missionaries. Also the tendency of these celebrations to end in violent conflicts may have become reason to avoid them in a world changing quickly due to modern industrialization and the influence of the West.

Calavia Saéz sees the medicine as a protagonist in an "indianist contra-evangelism", introducing indigenous elements and rituals "into the religious world of the whites, not without these hybrids coming back for new hybridization". Ayahuasca, he argues:

> … is not a chapter of shamanism or of culture, it is not a religion. Strictly speaking, ayahuasca isn't anything, or, to put it this way, it is nothing special.

The most he will say about it, from his strict anthropological viewpoint, is that it "organizes networks" of cultural relationships and information.

The truth is that we simply do not know when the ayahuasca brew we know today was first made, when DMT-containing admixtures were added to it, or by whom. Beyer writes in his essay "On the Origins of Ayahuasca" (2012):

> What is important about these arguments is that they allow us to infer a process of dynamic, innovative, and creative cultural interchange and adaptation over a relatively wide area over a period of perhaps hundreds of years. What they argue against is any idea that ayahuasca use has been widespread and static for fifty centuries.

02 CH6-9.indd 50 03/06/2019 16:44

This revisionist view means that contemporary experiments and new modalities being field-tested around the world are not necessarily iconoclastic. With the medicine, we find ourselves in an experimental, open-ended process of engagement. In fact, indigenous practitioners also experiment. Over the past few decades, for example, "Eagle and Condor" ceremonies have become popular. In these ceremonies, indigenous shamans from different lineages come together to mix their medicines in rituals that celebrate the integration of the North and South. Frequently, these ceremonies will include ingesting ayahuasca with peyote or San Pedro, and singing traditional ceremonial songs from the North and South. The Eagle and Condor refers to a set of prophecies, shared among many indigenous groups in North and South America, that we are entering a new age of spiritual realization and global communion. Interestingly, such prophecies may be modern admixtures also, borrowing from Christian ideas of a collective Apocalypse and redemption.

In regards to the origins of the ayahuasca brew, other students of Amazonian spiritual traditions counter the revisionist narrative that put its origins back in the 17th or 18th centuries. Matteo Norzi, Executive Director of the Shipibo-Conibo center, notes:

> There have been a lot of prominent academics bringing forward the theory that the Shipibo started using ayahuasca very recently. But there's another theory, a more archaeological, open-minded theory … which connects cultures in the Amazon with the patterns they use. By looking at the shared patterns of pre-Colombian communities from western Peru to the prehistoric Marajoara community in eastern Brazil, there's a common, visionary motif in their artwork, called the "polychrome horizon style".

To Norzi, these uncanny DMT-esque motifs and patterns found throughout the region suggest that these visionary states were accessed by many different cultures across the continent, for a very long time.

> "The origins of the use of ayahuasca in the Amazon basin are lost in the mists of prehistory," Dennis McKenna writes in "Ayahuasca: An Ethnopharmacologic History".
>
> He continues:

> No one can say for certain where the practice may have originated, and about all that can be stated with certainty is that it was already spread among numerous indigenous communities throughout the Amazon basin by the time ayahuasca came to the attention of Western ethnographers in the mid-19th century. This fact alone argues for its antiquity; beyond that, little is known.

Through legends and oral tradition, the Shipibo, Asháninka and Secoya all assert that their use of the medicine goes as far back as creation itself, but they can offer no proof beyond living memory. Meanwhile, members of the União do Vegetal syncretic Brazilian church say with full conviction that *hoasca* was a gift from the Hebrew King Solomon, to the Inca, whose golden fleets were the first to discover the New World. As intriguing as this idea may be, no evidence supports it. Perhaps fittingly, the origins of ayahuasca – like so much else about this vision-producing medicine – remain a mystery.