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Ayahuasca Reading

Peter Lamborn Wilson

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Retrieved on 17th May 2021 from hermetic.com
Read by Peter Lamborn Wilson on WBAI 99.5FM NYC sometime in 1994 during one of his Ayahuasca shows (same as the icaro tape). In this audio transcription unknown words are spelled phonetically and marked with (sp) when they first appear.

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Ayahuasca Drinkers among the cha-ma (sp) Indians by Heinz ku-sel (sp) see what I mean? Originally appeared in the Psychedelic Review, 1965 Read from reprint in the Psychozoic Press I lived for seven years traveling and trading in the upper Amazon region and often heard stories about the effect of ayahuasca.

Once on a long canoe trip down the river my Indian companion had chanted the song of the Goddess of Ayahuasca. Ayahuasca, a Quechua word meaning 'vine of death' is the collective name for various climbing tropical lianas and also designates the tea prepared from the leaves of the vine, either by itself or in combination with other leaves. Indians and the Mestizos alike visit the ayahuasquero or witch-doctor when they are ailing or think they need a general check-up, or want to make an important decision, or simply because they feel like it.

Among the scattered half-casts and natives of the swamps and rainforests of the Ucayali region the ayahuasca cult plays a significant role in their religious medical practices and provides them with a good deal of entertainment. Repeatedly I heard how in a vision induced by drinking the tea prepared

from the liana the patient had perceived the specific plant needed for his cure — had later searched and found it in the jungle and had subsequently recovered.

To the enigmatic mind of the Indian ayahuasca opens the gate to the healing properties of the forces of nature at whose mercy he lives. A recurrent theme whenever the natives refer to the results of the drug is the vision of the 'Procession of Plants,' with garlic, 'the king of the good plants' leading the way. Garlic, tobacco, quinine and oh-hey (sp), a tree latex, are at the head of a long line of friendly elf-like plants which, in ayahuasca visions, bow to mankind, offering their services. The Campa Indians, sturdy fellows, who today specialize in drawing mahogany and cedar logs for the sawmills in Iquitos undergo a purge of ayahuasca before they enter the flooded areas of the forest to float out the logs and assemble them into tremendous rafts. For a cure of that nature they prepare themselves by a prolonged diet, avoiding meat, salt, alcohol and sugar.

Aside from the main use of the drug for curing or keeping the consumer in good general condition, ayahuasca will, according to its users, induce clairvoyance and may for example solve a theft or prophesy the success or failure of a given enterprise. A man might be planning a trip to a certain river where he knows of a good place to tap rubber, but to be sure of good results he will consult ayahuasca first. After that, more than likely, he will abandon the enterprise altogether and set off in another direction to pan gold, hunt peck-oh-re (sp) or do something else.

In these unhurried hours and days I arrived at an insight into the native's fantastic beliefs and images, the richness of which is equaled only by the growth of the surrounding vegetation. Their superstitions, ideas and images freely cross and recross the borderline of reality in strangely patterned ways. Their stories have one thing in common — man, plant and animal are one, forever woven into an inextricable pattern of cause and

effect. Later I found that ayahuasca visions are fabrics that illustrate endless combinations of this pattern. Man, plant and animal also passively undergo the irradiations of each other. Irradiations of powers that to us are mostly non-existent. Somehow sometimes they even acquire each other's characteristics.

Once, while drifting in a canoe the Campa Indian with me disturbed the silence by imitating the voice of the kuto-mono (sp), a copper colored monkey. A kuto-mono from the shore answered him, a third joined in. After a while the whole shoreline seems to come alive with kuto-monos. The natives use this ability to imitate voices to such a degree that hunting takes on the character of treacherous assassination. Though hardly in the way of an equivalent, the animal world puts out a bird that I heard one night on the pa-cha-tey-ah (sp) River. It filled the darkness with an ascending scale of glass clear notes. Quite likely it is a beautiful scale but nevertheless it resembles the hysterical laughter of an insane women. It shocked me. I felt upset, mocked, laughed at. Everything calls in the jungle.

Once a Campa Indian in my boat when we were drifting far from the shore was called by ayahuasca! He followed the call and later emerged from the forest with the a sampling of the fairly rare liana that today is cultivated by the ayahuasquero in secret spots. I myself certainly did not hear the call.

If this jungle life and its irrational mutual dependency forms a picture of general confusion, ayahuasca is the magic mirror that reflects this confusion as something beautiful and attractive. For whomever I listened to, all manifested the enjoyment of a wondrous spectacle that was pleasing to the senses. If fearsome visions occurred they said that the ayahuasquero could easily dispel them by shaking a dry twig near the ear of the affected drinker; or by blowing the smoke of a cigarette on the crown of his head. The aesthetic climax of the spectacle was, they claimed, the 'vision of the goddess with concealed eyes,' who dwelt inside the twining tropical vine.

Many times I listened to these tales but it never crossed my mind to try the liana myself. It belonged definitely to the local Indian lore, to something sordid, outside of the law, something publicly frowned upon like the binding up of the heads that the cha-ma (sp) practice on their babies; or like burying one twin alive as they also do; or so many other equally fantastic or ghastly things.

In 1949 I had my headquarters in a white washed brick house in pu-cul-pa overlooking a wide curve of the Ucayali. Pu-cul-pa at that time was a village of about 200 homes, a Catholic church, an American Protestant mission, a Masonic temple and two primitive hotels. The place had gained some importance by being at the end of the only road precariously connecting Lima and the Pacific with a navigable river of the Amazon system. It also had an airport which could be used when the ground was dry. After the war and the falling of prices for rubber, the importance of the road decreased and Pu-cul-pa fell back into the stagnation of a Peruvian jungle settlement.

At that time I realized that my days in the jungle were coming to an end and in spite of being somewhat skeptical about the possible effects of the drug, I decided to try it. I drank the bitter salty extract of the vine three times. It seemed too much trouble to look for a venerated great ayahuasquero like Juan in-uma (sp) who lived up the river near masi-eh-sia (sp). There were a number of less widely esteemed fellows in pu-cul-pa such as no-lore-bey (sp) who was recommended to me as the most reliable of the witch doctors in the village. His hut was the last upstream in the long row of buildings above the steep shore of pu-cul-pa.

It was there that I found myself sitting on an empty gasoline crate while other people squatted on the floor. I drank the required dose, about a quart, and nothing happened. The only noticeable effect was an increased auditory sensitivity which is the reason why the drug is usually consumed in secluded places at night. A neighborhood rooster crowed recklessly

perfect but fully organized to the last detail of highly complex, consistent, yet forever changing, designs. They were harmonized in color and had a slick sensuous polished finish. The other attraction of which I was very conscious at the time was inexplicable sensation of intimacy with the visions. They were mine and concerned only me. I remembered an Indian telling me that whenever he drank ayahuasca he had such beautiful visions that used to put his hands over his eyes for fear someone might steal them. I felt the same way. The color scheme became a harmony of browns and greens. Naked dancers appeared turning slowly in spiral movements. Spots of brassy lights played on their bodies which gave them the texture of polished stone. Their faces were inclined and hidden in deep shadows. Their coming into existence in the center of the vision coincided with the rhythm of no-lore-bey's song and they advanced forward and to the sides, turning slowly. I longed to see their faces. At last the whole field of vision was taken up by a single dancer with inclined face covered by a raised arm. As my desire to see the face became unendurable it appeared suddenly in full close-up, with closed eyes. I knew that when the extraordinary face opened those eyes I experienced a satisfaction of a kind I had never known. It was the visual solution of a personal riddle. I got up and walked away without disturbing no-lore-bey. When I arrived home I was still subject to uncontrollable fits of yawning and laughter. I sat down before my house. I remembered that a drop of dew fell from the tin roof and that its impact was so noisy that it made me shudder. I looked at my watch and realized it was not yet midnight. The next day, and for quite some time I felt unusually well.

Three years later in a letter from pu-cul-pa I heard that no-lore-bey had been accused of bewitching a man into insanity and had been jailed in Iquitos.

my face were annoying, but they kept running madly and no matter how often I wiped my cheeks I could not dry them.

The first visual experience was like fireworks. Then a continuously creating power produced a wealth of simple and elaborate flat patterns and color. There were patterns that consisted of twining repeats and others geometrically organized with rectangles or squares that were like Maya designs or those decorations which the cha-ma paint of their thin ringing pottery. The visions were in constant flux. First intermittently, then successively the flat patterns gave way to deep brown, purple or beige depths like dimly lighted caves in which the walls were too far away to be perceived. At times snake-like stems of plants were growing profusely in the depths, at others these were covered with arrangements of myriads of lights that, like dewdrops of gems, adorned them. Now and then brilliant light illuminated the scene as though by photographic flash showing wide landscapes with trees placed at regular intervals or just empty plains. A big ship with many flags appeared in one of these flashes. A merry-go-round with people dressed in brightly colored garments in another. The song of no-lore-bey in the background seemed to physically touch a brain-center, and each of his hissing, guttural syncopations hurt and started new centers of hallucinations which kept on moving and changing to the rhythm of his chant. At a certain point I felt helplessly that no-lore-bey and his song could do ANYTHING with me. There was one note in his song that came back again and again which made me slide deeper whenever it appeared, deeper and deeper into a place where I might lose consciousness. If, to reassure myself, I opened my eyes, I saw the dark wall of the jungle covered with jewels — as if a net of lights had been thrown over it. Upon closing my eyes again I could renew the procession of slick, well-lighted images.

There were two very definite attractions. I enjoyed the unreality of a created world. The images casual, accidental or im-

which upset me considerably for it seemed to happen right inside my head. The people in the hut were disturbed also — they sighed and shifted their positions uneasily. No-lore-bey blamed the ineffectiveness of the drug on the fact that it had not been freshly prepared.

Another evening the guide who carried my blanket led me to a hut far outside the limits of the village. The hut, a typical structure of a floor on stilts without walls covered by a thatched roof, belonged to sal-dani-ah (sp), a mestizo I did not particularly like who had many patients in the village. I lay down on the raised floor of beaten palm bark, overlooking the clearing, and sal-dani-ah handed me a bottle of ayahuasca. I started to drink and heard him singing behind a partition where he was tending his patients. I listened carefully to the startling song that is always sung in ken-cha (sp), the language of the highland Indians which only old people in the Ucayali region speak. The song starts with a shrill musical question and continues with a series of answers intermixed with hissing sounds and syncopated with guttural noises produced with the tongue against the palate.

I drank the whole dose sal-dani-ah had prepared for me and felt slightly dizzy and nauseated. After a while I climbed down from the raised floor using the ladder, made as usual by hacking footholds into an upright log. The clearing and surrounding jungle looked as though covered with white ashes in the strong moonlight. From the hut behind me I heard sound of voices speaking monotonously. I heard sal-dani-ah intermittently singing the song or administering his cures. One of the procedures used to relieve a pain is actually to suck the pain out of the hurting member. When this has been often enough the pain is supposed to be located in the doctor's mouth and removed from there by spitting. Again my stimulated hearing reported those awful noises so intensely that at times they were hard to endure.

The next day sal-dani-ah attributed this failure to the fact that I has a slight cold. I was more skeptical than ever. After all, if unlike those people, I was not able to hear the call of the plant, or to walk noiselessly through the jungle maybe I lacked also the required acuteness of senses to meet the iridescent goddess.

I am glad that I went a third time. I made another appointment with no-lore-bey for a Saturday night. I walked out to his place at the edge of the forest at about 10pm. I realized that his one room house that stood in darkness and silence was crowded and waited outside till he emerged. I told him that I would rather not join the crowd and he obligingly showed me a good-sized canoe pulled up for repairs and resting about twenty feet from the cane wall of his shack towards the edge of the jungle. I wrapped myself in a blanket and lay down comfortably; my shoulders against the cedar walls of the dugout — my head resting on the slanting stern. I felt relaxed and full of expectation. No-lore-bey had appeared eager and confident. A small barefooted Indian with something queer and slightly funny about his face he showed a nervousness that did not go with his sturdy build. He seemed to be never quite present as if continuously distracted by frequent encounters with his vegetable gods and devils. His eyes were not steady but pulled in different directions. While something fearful, there was something very happy about this man, as if a hidden gaiety were buried under his worried features. He believed himself smart and powerful. He lived a glorious life, even if sometimes he seemed to go to pieces in his effort to walk back and forth professionally between two equally puzzling worlds. I remembered seeing him once in the como-sari-ah (sp) in conflict with one of them (one of those equally puzzling worlds), accused again of leading a disorderly life and practicing quackery. He was standing in his formerly green trousers before a wooden table and the Peruvian flag answering the rude guardia-seville (sp) with a humble smile — his eyes going apologetically in all directions.

He soon appeared with a gourd full of liquid he had carefully prepared by stewing for hours the leaves of the vine with those of another plant who's name possibly was his secret. He squatted at the canoe and whispered, his eyes going sideways, 'Gringo, today you will experience the real thing. I will serve you well. We will have the true intoxication. You will be satisfied, wait and see..' and he left me alone.

After a while a girl approached me from the hut and asked for a cigarette. She lighted it, inhaled, and for a moment I saw her wide face surrounded by hard black hair, then she walked noiselessly back into the hut. A two-eye-oh (sp) bird began to call repeatedly high above my face. The whistling and melodious sound at the end of his call seemed to touch me like a whiplash. A truck loaded with cedar boards left the village and on the distant highway accelerated madly and shifted gears. By that time I knew the drug was working in me. I felt fine and heard no-lore-bey whispering near my ear again, 'Do you want more? Shall I give you more? Do you want to see the Goddess well?' And again I drank the full gourd of cool bitter liquid. I cannot say how often no-lore-bey was present whispering and drinking with me, singing the song near my ear and far away, treating his patients and making those awful primitive noises that I despised. There was another sound that upset me more than anything, like something round falling into a deep well, a mysterious, slippery and indecent sound. Much later I found out that it was produced by normally innocuous action of no-lore-bey ladling water out of an old oil barrel by means of a small gourd. I yawned through what seemed to be an interminable night till the muscles of my face were strained. Sometimes I yawned so hard that it seemed to me as loud as the roaring of the sea on a rocky coast. Things got so gay, absorbing and beautiful that I had to laugh foolishly. The laughter came out of my insides of its own accord and shook me absurdly. At the same time I cried, and the tears that were running down