



AYAHUASCA CULTURE OR DRUG?

Pamela Flores

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PART I - Brindo por concerte

I stared into the shaman's eyes until they began to fade. I heard my breath, so loud and accelerated. Yet, with every minute that passed, I lost the sensation of weight in my body. I had finally entered the Ayahuasca trip. The jungle and I were one. I heard so many stories and comments about the experience, but it was my time to practice one of the most sacred rituals of the Peruvian Amazon.

Amazon chants filled my ears, and unrecognizable figures appeared standing in front of me. Mother Earth intertwined between my legs and I saw the stars traveling at incredible speeds. There was a sense of liberation in my soul and I saw a new opportunity in the world. Forgotten memories from long ago came back all at once. I could see myself as a child walking in my old house and playing in the garden with my father. It seemed like I lived an eternity in a single night. I must admit that my experience was intense.

We were a ten person group, each with a different reason to try the blessed Ayahuasca. Some were Amazons and others were foreigners, all looking for something different from the experience. During the preparation, I watched as some laughed at the songs and rehearsals. Others carefully paid attention to every detail of the ceremony. My trembling intensified, perhaps out of fear or anxiety. As the youngest in the group, I arrived at the ceremony with great respect and curiosity. I remember the deafening silence when the ceremony finished. We all crept outside and went on our paths.

Sometimes when I feel trapped, when I need to escape, I close my eyes and dream of being in the jungle. I close my eyes and free myself, thinking of the jungle. I have memories of heavy rains and warm breezes.

I have memories of the laughing Amazons and of the children running in the rain. This is the place where I acquired my best memories. It is the place where I found peace and where I found myself. I must thank my parents for showing me my favorite place in the world, for encouraging me to know my country and expand my perception.

My mother was always in search of the spiritual and the esoteric. She always sought after a life that would stray away from the material and one that would make her grow as a person. She often traveled around Peru and wanted to share her findings with her family. During one of our trips to the jungle, my mother befriended a shaman. His wife was a teacher who made sure to instruct her family on the value of our culture. The couple had two children, Orderique and Luis.

Orderique was a humble and warm young man. When I think of him, I am reminded of how my interest in Ayahuasca began. Orderique was a kid around my age and we quickly became friends. He was always smiling and our conversations were effortless. He showed me the jungle and told me the stories about its depth and the magic embedded in it. Of all his stories, I most vividly remembered the one about the Ayahuasca ritual. Orderique tried Ayahuasca when he was 13 years old. He described his experience so thoroughly that I became interested in participating. He used to tell me "Este cuento es diferente, porque este cuento es real. La selva es poderosa."¹

I became obsessed. I constantly asked my mother when I'd be allowed to participate. "Cuando estés lista," she replied. When was I going to be? I felt that I was ready but my mother knew better. She was so familiar with our traditions and knew that my interest was driven by superficial curiosity. When I was young and naive, I did not know the necessary preparation. However, with time I understood that it was not a tourist attraction or a hobby, but rather an experience that required self-commitment.

¹ This tale is different because it is real. The jungle is powerful.

When I was finally ready, I had so much respect for the ritual that I felt I did not deserve to practice it.. I confessed this to my mother and she answered, "Sabes que estás lista cuando ni siquiera te sientes digna de todo lo que tiene tu país. Con un corazón y una mente humilde."²

This time, my trip to the jungle was different because I was going to practice the Ayahuasca that I had waited so long to try. Every minute of that journey felt like an eternity.

Today, I feel ashamed of my desperation. I was so disrespectful and so impatient with so little knowledge driven by my desire to experience what my friend had.

For the Amazons, the Ayahuasca keeps ancestral and spiritual respect that cannot be devalued by portraying the ritual as a business strategy or as a tourist attraction. Once again, I thank my mother for making me wait, allowing me to mature, and ultimately, helping me to know the true value of the ritual.

² You know you're ready when you don't even feel worthy of every thing your country has. With a heart and a humble mind.

PART II - Diferentes ojos que miran

The Ayahuasca topic has many controversies. The brew is made with a plant that contains drugs such as LSD and MAOI¹. I have heard several comments from people who consider the ritual a fiasco, a fashion, or a business strategy to attract tourists. I have also heard from people who feel that the ritual deserves more recognition and respect for its cultural significance. So, is Ayahuasca a culture or a drug? I began my journey to search for the answer. As a Peruvian who respects her culture, it seems that many of these comments were made by ill-informed people who were not aware of the cultural value.

I began reading texts by various authors around the world and was able to talk with different people. I realized that there were three popular conversations: Ayahuasca is a drug with profitable potential, justifiable uses, and considerable cultural value.

Ayahuasca is profitable because it provides monetary support to those who perform its ritual. Rachel Proctor and Martin Lee agree that the ritual can be made a business. They both suggest that this change would make it more accessible to a Western audience. Proctor believes that modernizing Ayahuasca and turning it into a business would help shamans and their families have a better standard of living. Lee agrees with Proctor's idea that Ayahuasca can be profitable, but disagrees on altering the ritual. He believes that even though the ceremony could become a business, it should remain local. In my opinion, when you turn a tradition into a business, you lose its true essence. Culture should never have commercial purposes. Of course, some people disagree.

I had the opportunity to talk with Jean, a Frenchman who came to Peru to cure his cancer with Ayahuasca. After hearing stories of success, Jean came with high expectations that later led to

¹ editors will add definitions, etc.

disappointment. Talking with him breaks my soul because he lost faith in more than Ayahuasca. Jean told me that for him, Ayahuasca is nothing more than a money-making strategy. When I asked about the cultural importance, Jean answered "I do not know. But for me, Ayahuasca does not really cure the soul or other important and mortal diseases." I respect Jean's opinion, because it's based on first-person experience.

Authors such as Joe Rosenheim and Tina Courtney, focus on Ayahuasca's benefits. For example, they used Ayahuasca as a medical drug to cure depression and alcoholism. Both highlight the positive impact Ayahuasca had in their lives. I always wonder if Jean's perspective would change if his experience had been different. Maria Eugenia, a Spanish shaman, told me that the idea of a business with Ayahuasca would be magnificent because it would open many doors for shamans to expand the reach of their knowledge. Who would not like to see their traditions spread all over the world?

Authors Rachel Proctor and Alden Wicker believe that Ayahuasca should be more valued because it is a long-standing tradition in the Amazon and I believe in their assessment. Wicker and I share the belief that the Ayahuasca ceremony is not a tourist attraction and should only be performed by those who are committed and respectful to the Peruvian tradition.



Tiger, animal of power commonly seen during ayahuasca visions

Maria Elena and Paula, two Peruvians, agree with this need to keep the rituals sacred. They consider that the ritual is among the most sacred rituals of Peru and should not be transformed into a business or practiced by anyone besides real shamans. Speaking with Paula, she told me that it was the shamans who brought the ritual before the Incas and that an event of such importance should remain untouched. In Proctor's article, one shaman states that the Ayahuasca ritual should not be a business because the culture does not have a price. Maria Elena, like me, considers it logical to charge for the ritual. The shamans are usually very humble people whose greatest incomes come from the rituals they do. The rituals are cheap and the little money they

earn goes to their family. They are eternally grateful when one shows interest and respect for their traditions. I guess it's because Peruvians feel so close to our culture; our lineage. We are aware or have experienced the history of our country. We have grown up knowing the struggle our ancestors endured to reach the point where we are now.

Considering various viewpoints, it's clear that someone removed from the topic tends to formulate a different opinion from those who experience this reality first-hand. I think that not respecting the beliefs and perspectives of others is what often generates chaos in the world. We often believe that we are right, but we forget that our truth is not the only truth. Is Ayahuasca a drug? Yes. But it is also part of this culture's history that arose despite the adversities. Sometimes it is useful to expand our view on a topic because it may help us understand the world better. As my mother used to say, "lo cortez no quita lo valiente."

PART III - Por qué escribo

"So, should I visit Peru? Is it like *civilized*?" I was shocked when the Uber driver asked me this question. Not only did I give him a 1-star rating, but his comment deeply affected me. A lump formed in my throat and my eyes filled with tears, but despite how much it hurt, the comment reminded me how much I love my country. Peru has had a difficult journey throughout the years. Colonization, terrorism, political unrest, and economic instability remain embedded in the culture and identities of my people. Despite the odds, I believe we have come very far with so little and our journey is not finished. Our history carries pain, but it also carries victory, and for Peruvians, our rich culture is what drives us and fills us with pride.

You may wonder why I speak so highly of my country. The answer is simple. Peru is beautiful. The people are vibrant, the landscapes are breathtaking, and the culture is unique. I was blessed with the opportunity to travel around Peru and learn about my history at a young age. I remember traveling around my country with my family and friends. I have vivid memories of the sunsets, the sand between my toes, the icy cold feeling in my face, and the sweat dripping down my brow. Knowing the history of my lineage helped me build my identity. As time passed, I discovered the importance of explaining my culture to others. It is my duty to clarify and reconstruct the misconceptions of the third world country to which I owe so much.

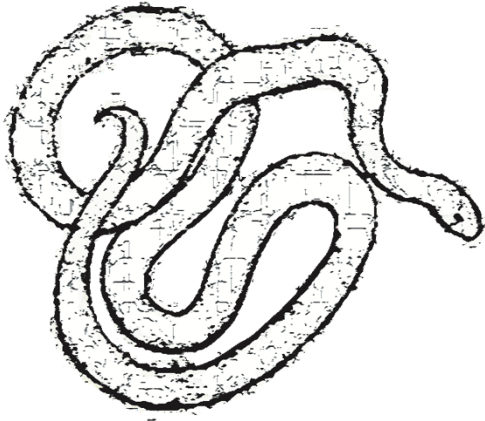
"Yes sir, Peru is civilized. We might not be rich in money, but we are rich in culture. Let me explain."

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