

A Case Report of an Individual's Experience Participating in a Traditional Costa Rican Ayahuasca Ceremony

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Abstract:

Historical evidence has shown the potential efficacy of psychedelic drugs in the treatment of psychiatric diseases. Reporting psychedelic drug experiences in biomedical academic literature is critical to the progress of psychedelic psychiatry research and the potential implementation of psychedelics as therapeutics. Ayahuasca is a plant-based compound with hallucinogenic properties used by South American shamans to treat various psychological ailments. This report describes the case of a 25-year-old male's experience participating in a traditional Costa Rican ayahuasca ceremony and the immediate and long-term effects of the therapy on the participant.

Case Report

The participant (JN) was a 25-year-old male who had discovered Ayahuasca therapy through web research. His motivations for completing the therapy were to gain a deeper understanding of his psyche and to address tensions with his family. In the fall of 2017, JN personally funded a trip to the Rythmia Life Advancement Center in Guanacaste, Costa Rica where he participated in an ayahuasca ceremony. The ceremony lasted for four days during which ayahuasca therapy sessions were conducted at night and with recovery from the sessions during the day. The first three ayahuasca sessions began at sunset (6-7pm) and concluded around midnight with the last night beginning at sunset and continuing until sunrise. Each session was led by a ceremonial leader or shaman who would guide all the participants in one room (Figure 1).



Figure 1: Photograph of setting in which ceremony took place. Layout consisted of a bed for each participant, buckets for purging and a central area.

Prior to ingesting the ayahuasca brew, a rapé (pronounced ha-pay) ceremony occurs where a tobacco-like substance, known as the mapacho is inhaled to prepare for the ingestion of ayahuasca. This was said to be done to potentiate the effects of the ayahuasca. The mapacho is inhaled through a pipe that the shaman blows into. After the rapé ceremony, the ayahuasca brewed by the shamans was then served in a liquid form. The shamans serve each dose in a cup of approximately 1.5 ounces. They dispense dosages of the compound for each participant by assessing every participant's particular temperament as well as gauging the overall energy of the room. There are multiple opportunities for each participant to go up to receive the brew each night. Each participant is told that if they are situationally aware that an offering is occurring, even if he or she is feeling challenged, that they should go and receive the offering. The effects of the ceremony were described to the participant as wide-ranging. One shaman stated that ayahuasca has the ability to bridge both the physical and external and the mental and internal worlds. The goal of the ceremony is for each participant to achieve a "miracle", referenced as a supernatural-like experience that can be reflected and utilized in daily life.

The first night was described as an adjustment period and a physical struggle. JN adjusted to the group setting and components of the ceremony itself, including entrusting the shamans, tasting the brew, reflecting on the sacramental reverence given to 25 compound, and exploring the environment. There were three offerings and JN received all three doses during the first night. Within the first one to two hours of ingestion of his first dose of ayahuasca, JN began feeling incredibly uncomfortable. He experienced gastrointestinal distress describing that his “stomach was in knots”, with associated nausea, and constipation. He recalls a shaman calming him down through the use of a song or chant which he found was very effective. He was able to lie down and noted the onset of visual hallucinations with periods of racing thoughts. He noted a loss of coordination and gait instability, particularly when going up to receive an additional dose.

The second night was described as more comfortable and personal, but with a much higher visual and physical intensity. There were two offerings and JN received both doses during the second night. After the ingestion of the first dose, he felt a sense of relaxation and had no major complications. However, after consumption of the second dose, he began to experience nausea and constipation.

A particular moment occurred during the second night of the ceremony that resonated with JN. He had gone to the bathroom and a female participant had fallen right outside. While deeply under the influence of the compound, he attempted to help the participant. He saw visual hallucinations and thought the experience was within his own psyche. He described seeing the other participant’s body outlined by multiple layers in a spectrum of colors. Upon reflection, JN thought, at this moment, that the ayahuasca had bridged both the physical or external and mental or internal worlds. After calling for

the shamans, they took care of the participant who had fallen, and a shaman helped him back to his station. The shaman began to perform a ritualistic blessing using rubbing oils and fanning with leaves which alleviated JN’s tension from the incident.

Soon after this incident, he began having vivid hallucinations. A particular hallucination was a visualization of himself at the age of two to three. He saw his younger self running around the center area of the room. As he attempted to interact with the hallucination, geometric patterns began to appear. These geometric patterns were of a small circle within a larger circle and he felt as if the small circle were about to burst. He reported feeling anger and frustration while this was occurring and later felt the hallucination was a manifestation of his inner state. The night came to a close with JN beginning to reconcile the two worlds.

The third night was the greatest in terms of the intensity of the visual hallucinations and as well as the mood of the room. There were two offerings and he received both. He recalled extensive visual hallucinations with bright white and yellow flashing lights emanating from the distance followed by the presence of an entity. The entity was in a red and orange color gradient who resembled a samurai. He reports that the entity kept coming closer and closer towards him until it was right in front of him. After the ceremony, he sketched a portrait of the entity titled “Ribbon Lady” (Figure 2). As JN was attempting to calm himself down, the entity began to transform. It transformed into an object resembling an orange, longitudinal scrolling road with evenly spaced horizontal lines. This road began to move like a conveyor belt and was perceived by JN to be shoved down his throat. At this moment he was undergoing intense panic.

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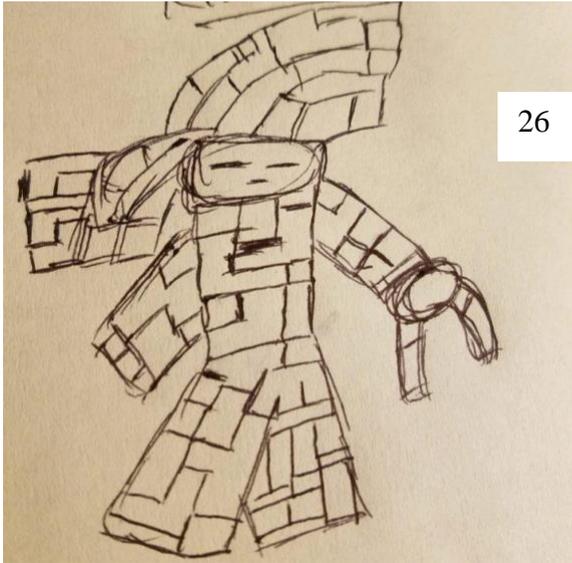


Figure 2: Ribbon Lady

The previous experiences subsided soon after and he received the second dose of the night. This led to the peak portion of the ceremony where JN felt like he had lost his mind. He was hyper attuned to the purging, the screaming, and the crying of the other participants in the room, but found it overwhelming to focus on himself. He described this as a psychological challenge of having to surrender to the chaos that developed within his mind and within the group. There was no relief until the shamans began to chant and play instruments, which gradually began to establish order out of the chaos.

The fourth night JN reported a milder reaction upon ingestion and became somnolent soon after without any other physical symptoms or hallucinations. He fell asleep and awoke the next morning well-rested. Upon waking, a particular observation was made. JN saw a scorpion crawling underneath his pillow and despite the close proximity, it did not sting him. While maintaining skepticism, he had a profound belief that a supernatural element of luck protected him from harm. Later that morning,

the participant took part in a gathering with the other men of the group during which they were blessed as the ceremony concluded.

JN reports that his ayahuasca experience had many physical, spiritual, and emotional challenges. These challenges included physical symptoms upon ingesting the compound, the suspension of belief in how the treatment could cure illness, and the allowing of oneself to be vulnerable to the psychological effects of the compound. The participant believes that what had occurred upon completion of the ceremony was that he received a “miracle”. His attitudes and comfort towards the unknown shifted favorably. He began welcoming new opportunities in his career and he changed how he spent his free time. He developed more meaningful and deeper personal relationships with his family members. He also shifted his perspective to seek out alternative ways of thinking (reiki, comedy, art and music performances, hypnosis, travel) to enhance his own well-being. The experiences and subsequent realizations that JN came to during his ayahuasca ceremony continue to positively impact the way he lives to this day.

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