The Ayahuasca Experience: A Phenomenological Study of Tourists in Iquitos, Peru

Master's thesis by Jesse Wasson

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Supervisor: Sébastien Tutenges PhD, Senior Lecturer

Division of Social Anthropology

Department of Sociology, Lund University

Abstract

Yearly thousands travel from around the globe to Peru to participate in the ceremonial consumption of ayahuasca under the guidance of a shaman. The brew stimulates a psychedelic state in users that triggers hallucinations, powerful emotional responses, and severe physical reactions, all of which are codified into ritual practice. Drawing from ethnographic material gathered from one month of field work in Iquitos, Peru, this study utilizes a phenomenological framework to qualitatively analyze ayahuasca as experienced by the foreign tourist, critically engaging with the concept of experience itself as primarily a social phenomenon. Applying the concept of phenomenological modification, I argue that broad cultural narratives of New Age and Indigenous spiritual paradigms coupled with the social contexts of the embodied ceremonial space orient ritual participants towards particular experiences. These include deep personal healing, spiritual transformation, and encounters with spirits and the spirit world. Narratives and social contexts not only serve to shape these experiences, but imbue them with meaning, and offer tools for the individual to organize their chaotic and profound experiences as they express them creatively in dialogue with others. Narratives in the ayahuasca context serve both as boundaries to profound and overwhelming experiences and as stages for creative social expressions of human agency.

Key Words: social anthropology, phenomenology, ayahuasca, ritual healing, Peru

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1. Introduction

Walking the riverside boulevard in the city Iquitos Peru, one gets the sense that it is hub of truly international tourism, far from what one would expect from an isolated city accessible only by boat or plane. The street is lined with European style restaurants and cafes, shops offering a wide variety of goods, and street merchants selling beautiful handmade souvenirs. Numerous tour operations have their advertisers patrolling the street recruiting tourists for trips by boat up the Amazon River or to treks through jungle with a bonified expert. Hang around long enough and you are likely to be posed the question "are you here for ayahuasca?"

Ayahuasca is a prominent feature in the cultural landscape of Iquitos. All of the restaurants in the popular tourist area offer a special ayahuasca diet menu and various tour operators advertise ayahuasca packages that will ferry you to a lodge or village devoted to the practice of its ceremonial consumption. If you have the money, a retreat specifically oriented around ayahuasca consumption my appeal to you, typically offering multi-day packages complete with spas, yoga classes, hikes, and access to a variety of other medicinal plants with the guarantee of participating in an ayahuasca ceremony with an authentic shaman. The most popular wears sold on the street are necklaces featuring a polished slice of the ayahuasca vine, or the ornately decorated tapestries of the Shipibo tribe, inlaid with intricate geometric patterns symbolizing aspects of the ayahuasca ceremony. Visiting a bar or café frequented by tourists inevitably leads to overhearing conversations between people excitedly recounting their experiences participating in a ceremony or seeking advice as to where the trustworthy shamans, practitioners, or retreats are.

Ayahuasca tourism in South America, specifically Peru, has exploded in the last decade. Yearly scores of people flock to the largest city in the world not accessible by road to drink the hallucinogenic brew under the guidance of a shaman with the hopes of 'healing' one's self, either physically, psychologically, or spiritually. The New Yorker magazine claims that there is an Ayahuasca "boom" in the United States and it is becoming particularly easy to consume in places like San Francisco or New York (Levy 2016). The ceremony is increasingly occupying space in the popular imagination, with a variety of documentaries, reality television shows, and a myriad of news articles exploring the topic or describing individuals' personal experiences. This burgeoning interest in ayahuasca is spurred by of a number of globalized processes, most notably

the increasing cultural and commercially exploited interest in ‘New Age’ practices and spirituality, which coincides with a tourism industry that is increasingly oriented towards providing authentic cultural experiences.

This study is based off of data gathered in the city of Iquitos, Peru which I identify as a major nexus in the increasingly globalized and complex network of ayahuasca tourism. Occupying a popular tourism neighborhood for roughly a month, I collected ethnographic material and interviewed a wide variety of people occupying various positions on the network of ayahuasca tourism, from tourists to facilitators to retreat owners, embedding myself in what is increasingly recognized as the ayahuasca capital of the world. What draws people to this remote corner of the globe to participate in the ayahuasca ceremony?

Purpose of Study

This study focuses on the ritual consumption of ayahuasca by foreign tourists in Iquitos, Peru. Its purpose is to analyze the ayahuasca journey as experienced by the tourist, utilizing phenomenology as a primary theoretical framework to delineate a clearer picture of what characterizes ayahuasca experiences. Despite barriers presented by legal structures, ayahuasca is increasingly easy to consume in North America and Europe, with psychedelics in general having a long and storied history of consumption in Western culture. Not only is traveling to a comparatively remote part of the world a huge investment for most travelers, but the process of ayahuasca consumption often entails some unpleasant side effects such as visceral bodily reactions or negative hallucinations. Considering these inconveniences, why does the individual partake on this journey? Previous studies have shown us that healing is one of the most commonly reported reasons that foreigners travel to participate in ceremonies (Fotious 2012:6). The pursuit of these alternative practices is rooted in a spirituality that often explicitly challenges notions of Western medical practices and epistemological commitments to scientific materialism, blending narratives of New Age healing and Indigenous mythology (Seddon 2014). I aim to illustrate how these broad narratives pattern expectations as the participant becomes enculturated to the practice of the ceremony as well as analyze the tools provided for the construction of meaning after the ceremony is completed. The ayahuasca experience will be elaborated both within the confines of its ritual consumption and the visualizations it stimulates and beyond to

incorporate broader contexts of socialization to globalized ayahuasca culture, its norms and discourses, and processes of meaning making.

Research Questions

This thesis will examine the following three questions, each to be addressed in separate chapters: How is the ayahuasca tourist prepared for their experience/experiences with ayahuasca? What characterizes the experience of the ayahuasca ceremony itself and how is that experience communicated to others? How do users orient themselves to this experience or experiences as a whole after the ceremony? I aim to contextualize ayahuasca consumption within broader narrative frameworks that serve both to give shape to the experience as well as assist in making sense of the chaos of the psychedelic event. The individual is an active social consciousness exercising their agency in preparation for the ceremony and is turn "prepared" through enculturation to a normative discourse that patterns expectations and shapes ultimate outcomes. The ceremony itself is highly structured and the participant's experience is influenced and guided by the environment, the shaman, and other participants. Cultural variables color the individual's orientation to the event after the ceremony, as well as enable or inhibit their integration of the experience. The ayahuasca experience is a multifaceted process that plays out both within the self and across the social realm, as well as across time and space.

What is Ayahuasca?

Ayahuasca is a brew made from the combination of the *Banisteriopsis caapi* vine and the leaves of *Psychotria virdis* found in the Amazon that when consumed trigger altered states of consciousness in its users (Tupper 2011:2). Ayahuasca consumption has a wide and varied history of usage among Amazonian peoples and often occupies a central role in the ritual practices and the organization of cosmologies, typically containing elements of communion with spirits or the spirit realm. The brew has a wide range of purposes between different Amazonian groups, such as predicting the future, communicating with spirits, aiding in hunting, determining the cause of diseases, among many others (Tupper 2011:22-23).

The ceremonial practice of ayahuasca consumption most commonly refers to Mestizo Shamanism in the popular dialogue, although Indigenous tribes such as the Shipibo are also popularly represented in ayahuasca tourism as well. Mestizo is a vaguely defined category which

Amazonian people use to refer to the Spanish speaking population of "mixed-blood" status in Peru (Gow 1994:91), but has a complex history and has been used broadly to refer to people of mixed parentage in the early colonial era (Rappaport 2014). The Mestizo shaman commonly represents the category of people positioned to interact with foreigners in ceremonial practices in much of the literature, though it retains its ambiguous designation. Despite asserting many Indigenous characteristics, Mestizo people "often define themselves specifically in opposition to the *nativos*" (Beyer 294:2009). The terms "curandero" or "vegetalismo" and "ayahuascero" all refer to practitioners of ayahuasca shamanism which may be Indigenous, Mestizo, or foreign, although tend to be formally recognized as such only after undergoing initiation rites of some form to gain the title (Tupper 2011:14).

Despite popular claims to the monolithic nature of a narrowly defined practice of healing that has been passed down from ancestral inhabitants of the jungle, Ayahuasca's uses, its ceremonial practices, and its symbolism vary between Amazonian peoples and have continued to evolve in response to the historical context of missionary contact, colonization, and more recently commercial globalization (Beyer 2009, Brabec de Mori 2014, Gow 1994, Peluso 2015, Shepard 2014). This "entheogenic" substance began to expand beyond tribal ceremonies and into multiple religions in South America in the 18th century.[1] More recently religious institutions such as the Santo Daime, among others, have acted as a catalyst for the expansion of ayahuasca practices to other nations presenting a challenge to legal structures and public policy regarding the religious use of entheogenic substances (Labate 2012, Tupper 2008, 2011). The substance has been the subject of increased global attention both academically and popularly for its potential therapeutic effects. The potential for treatment is advertised to foreign audiences, claiming the capacity to address all manner of psychological and physical ailments (Beyer 2012:3), and the ritual context is emphasized as central to its efficacy as a source of healing (Talin & Sanabria 2017).

The ayahuasca ceremony has been standardized and marketed to a global consumer that is increasingly engaged in shamanic tourism, colored by New Age expectations of healing and spirituality (Fotiou 2010). The typical ceremony varies widely, sometimes including other activities such as yoga, meditation, floral bathes, or taking the poison tree frog secretions

[1] *Entheogenic* substances are psychoactive plants used as spiritual sacraments often in ritual contexts. Ayahuasca, psilocybin, peyote and so on are common examples (Tupper 2002:499)

"Kambo," which are burned into the skin. Commonly small groups of people varying between several to sometimes larger than a dozen will take their turn drinking the brew and lay on their mat to contemplate their journey guided by a shaman. The brew can potentially cause severe psychological distress due to powerful hallucinations or visions, and often induces vomiting, hence the nearly ubiquitous presence of a plastic bucket at all ceremonies. These reactions are often incorporated into the ritual ceremony as symbolic of the healing process; the visions represent communicating with the spirit world and the physical reaction of vomiting or purging often interpreted as sickness leaving the body (Campos 2011 Chp 1).

Literature Review

Academic interest in ayahuasca has evolved from cataloguing its use among Indigenous tribes to critically evaluating the effects of globalization and the broader phenomenon of "drug" or "shamanic tourism." Richard Evans Schultes is widely recognized for popularizing ayahuasca research with numerous publications, emphasizing its cultural significance as central to the way of life of Indigenous Amazonians in a widely cited quote (Shanon 2010:15, Luna 2011:1):"The mind-altering properties of this narcotic drink have made it one of the most basically important aspects of Indian life in the Western Amazon…one can name hardly any aspect of living or dying, wakefulness or sleep, where *caapi* hallucinations do not play a vital, nay, overwhelming, role" (Schultes 1982:206). His work co-authored with anthropologist Albert Hofmann *Plants of the Gods: Their Sacred, Healing, and Hallucinogenic Powers* (1979) held significantly broad appeal and remains a work frequently cited by individuals within the ayahuasca community today. Schultes as a biologist, however, was primarily focused on the botanical identification and cataloguing of plant species.

Traditional anthropological studies analyzed the place psychoactive plants had in social organization and their role in cosmological orientation. Two works in particular stand out. Gerardo Reichel-Dolmatoff's *The Shaman and the Jaguar: A Study of Narcotic Drugs among the Indians of Colombia* (1975) examines the centrality of psycho-active plants to the Tukano tribes beliefs and practices and the relation cosmological motifs have to the ceremony and hallucinations under the influence of the brew. Luis Eduardo Luna's *Vegetalismo: Shamanism among Mestizo population of the Peruvian Amazon* (1986) was one of the first studies to focus on Mestizo shamanism as opposed to practices among Amazonian tribes. Due to the inherent

nuance and ambiguity of the term Mestizo, Luna opted to use the term to refer to a broader cultural category as opposed to a strictly bounded ethnicity (Luna 1986:15). Luna's work took place during a time in which, much like what we are experiencing today, an "explosion" of popular and academic interest in both shamanism and "psychotropic plants and mind-altering compounds" in the Western world was taking place (Luna 1986:9).

Ayahuasca had been part of the cultural milieu in the United States for quite some time, albeit more underground, as far back as the 60s as evidenced by William S. Burroughs' and Allen Ginsberg's *The Yage Letters* (1963), coinciding with the popular interest in psychedelics at the time. Contemporary psychedelic consumption and its incorporation into New Age practices is far more than part of a fringe culture, as it is taken seriously by academics and wider culture alike as a legitimate means for self-improvement. Stimulating enthusiastic attention from the wider popular audience are works like Luna's *Ayahuasca Visions: The Religious Iconography of a Peruvian Shaman* (1991) in which he partnered with shaman and painter Pablo Amaringo to bring the cosmology of Amazonian shamanism brilliantly to life with vivid illustrations and *The Shaman and Ayahausca: Journeys to Sacred Realms* (2011) by Peruvian shaman Don Jose Campos, translated by Alberto Roman and edited by Geraldine Overton. The success of these works represent not only an increasing general interest in alternative healing practices and psychotropic plants, but also a desire for "authentic" shamanism, a demand to hear from the "culture experts" themselves.

As the popular interest has grown, anthropological research has begun to explore the nuances of ayahuasca use and a much more complex picture has taken shape. Despite popular claims to the contrary, ayahuasca's uses and practices are highly variable among Amazonian peoples and exist in a constant state of renegotiation and evolution. The historical contexts of missionary contact, colonization, and more recently commercial globalization spur this process, as explored by multiple scholars. Peter Gow was one of the first to challenge the conclusion that ayahuasca use was passed down unchanged from a primordial past and complicates the notion of ultimate shamanic authority as belonging solely to tribes that occupy the forest. Gow describes the complex nature of the ayahuasca network and the relation of the jungle inhabitants to the Mestizo occupying the periphery between the urban and jungle environments. In spite of the "strong ideological assumption that the forest natives are the ultimate source of shamanic

knowledge," Gow flips the standard presumption proposing that the position of the Mestizo makes them particularly powerful for their ability to interact with the white foreigner, with forest people looking "downriver for the source of shamanic power, to the cities of Pucallpa and Iquitos" (Gow 1994:96).

Despite Luna's foray into the topic, the literature up to this point had primarily concerned itself with the "cultural authenticity of particular communities," largely ignoring historical complexities and the emergence of new social relations, particularly the Mestizos, whose position "provides a continuous field in which Amazonian people can operate" between the different categories of identity (Gow 1994: 98,101). Many scholars have expanded on Gow's conclusion of a practice that is characterized by a state of flux and renegotiation with a myriad of ethnographic examples. Glenn Shepard catalogues recent changes in ayahuasca use among the Matisgenka and Tora peoples of southern Peru, making the case that "widespread ayahuasca use even among Indigenous populations may be fairly recent" (2014:16). Beatriz Caiuby Labate has written extensively about ayahuasca, exploring the incorporation of Christian rituals and imagery spurred from missionary contact into ayahuasca ceremonies. The many "Brazilian ayahuasca religions" are countless and are "the result of multiple combinations of cosmology and practices of the original branches with contemporary urban religious and therapeutic trends, as well as other cultural and religious elements" (Labate 2012:88).

Stephen Beyer's *Singing to the Plants: A Guide to Mestizo Shamanism in the Upper Amazon* (2010) currently provides one of the most comprehensive encyclopedic resources on the topic of Mestizo shamanism, bringing together many different fields of study and presenting the topic to a wider popular audience. Despite the growing body of specialized academic literature regarding ayahuasca shamanism and a slew of books intended for general audiences, such a comprehensive modern text regarding the Mestizo did not exist. Although Luna made a similar observation decades prior, Beyer notes that anthropologists still seem to lack "interest in people who are not, in some obvious sense, Indigenous" (2010:296). However, the topic is particularly relevant to our historical moment as "Mestizo shamanism occupies an exceptional place among the shamanisms of the Upper Amazon, assimilating key features of Indigenous shamanisms, and at the same time adapting and transforming them" in the face of globalization and increasing shamanic tourism (Beyer 2010: xi). He, like Luna, opts to use the term as a cultural category as

opposed to a racial or ethnic one, stating that the concept "emerged from a colonial discourse that privileged the idea of racial purity and justified discrimination by a complex quasi-scientific taxonomy of racial mixtures," and makes the crucial observation that the "boundaries of this identity are porous" (Beyer 2010: 294).

Critical analysis of capitalist relations, the role of the state, and post-colonial theory has colored recent academic engagement with ayahuasca studies. Research in drug anthropology has shown that drugs when moved to the capitalist northern context, their uses change to "fit the needs and desires of European consumers" implying a need to incorporate the asymmetrical nature of power relations into the mix (Klein 2012:5). The term "shaman" and its utilization in the globalized context has come under scrutiny. Arguably, the essentializing of Indigenous identities and practices is illustrated by the term "shaman" itself as it occupied an ever-changing mythic narrative to describe "the other," while "western attitudes toward shamanism have been ambivalent form the beginning" (Stuckrad 2002:773). Macarena Gómez-Barris in studying New Age tourism in Peru proposes that the shaman can be construed as a constructed "figure of alterity" that "became the repository for all kinds of colonial fantasies and structural violence," with "new forms of healing emerging to resist and counteract the violent imposition of European models" (2012:68).

This kind of structural violence also takes form in novel economic relations brought about by ayahuasca tourism, which drastically affect local communities. Daniela M. Peluso describes the development of an "entrepreneurial ecosystem" which exacerbates inequality in local communities and introduces foreign ownership, shifting authority away from locals, hence destabilizing "the local ayahuascquero's importance in the international ayahuasca network" (Peluso 2015:210, 212). Bernd Brabec de Mori analyzes these developments from the perspective of the native Shipibo tribe regarding their interactions with "gringo" tourists and shaman trainees, revealing complex and nuanced attitudes as well as adaptations to novel cultural relations as the ceremony evolves in response to new demands (2014). Evgenia Fotiou (2010), which I rely on heavily for this study, offers essential insight by filling a gap, studying the ayahuasca tourist themselves as the process of shamanic tourism plays out in Iquitos, Peru. She shows how the popularity of the ceremony is taking place in a general historical moment in which Western discourse is shifting its paradigm in relation to drugs and drug use.

The picture that emerges is one of dynamic and continuous change, most recently in response to forces of globalization. Many lament these changes. Beyer notes the lack of successors to take up the practice: "*no hay future,* there is no future. And then a thing of great beauty and power will be gone" (Beyer 2010:385). Luna during his time pondered "am I witnessing a dying tradition" noting the appeal of "the commodities…of the external world" to those who could potentially apprentice as shamans (Luna 1986:163). Shepard, however, asserts that this discourse reveals the problematic nature of our reliance on terms such as "indigeneity" and "authenticity," stating that "Indigenous groups, supposedly the millennial caretakers of ancient sacred traditions, are involved in the same dynamic process of contact, adaptation, and change as everyone else" (Shepard 2015:34). Indeed, despite a long and brutal history of colonialization and aggressive privatization of territory, Indigenous identity has evolved in a myriad of ways but also coalesced and reasserted itself on the global stage. Ayahuasca tourism increasingly represents enormous cultural capital. Frédéric Laugrand and Robert R. Crépeau argue that while experiencing many fundamental transformations, these spiritual networks "constitute types of "nexuses" that translate into an increased flow of ideas, exchanges, and solidarities between Indigenous societies" that have the potential to empower individuals, with shamanism maintaining "its political dimension, affording one answer among many to conflicts and misery…especially in colonial situations…but also in times of crisis" (2015:290).

Our historical moment finds us once again with a broad intersection of academic and public interest in psychotropic plants, with psychedelics in general a topic of research in many different fields across academia. The journal *Anthropology of Consciousness* devoted an issue specifically to the topic of ayahuasca with an introduction in which the case is made for an increased multi-disciplinary emphasis on ayahuasca research, praising the Multidisciplinary Association for Psychedelic Studies or MAPS for its initiation of a convention dedicated to the subject (Beyer 2012:1). *The Fellowship of The River* (2017) written by Joseph Tafur, MD provides an autobiographical account of his experiences with ayahuasca rituals while making the case for its therapeutic effects and describes his active promotion of Ayahuasca therapy in the medical community. The potential of psychedelics as a legitimate avenue for therapy is being taken seriously by a variety of psychologists as an avenue to treat a variety of illnesses, from depression to trauma and even end of life anxiety, with ayahuasca specifically is cited as a

potentially powerful therapeutic tool in treating addiction and PTSD (Talin & Sanabria 2017, Thomas et al 2013, Inserra 2018).

However, much of this research has neglected to provide an in-depth analysis of the experience of consuming ayahuasca itself. Benny Shanon in *The Antipodes of the Mind* (2010) draws from hundreds of interviews and his own experiences utilizing a phenomenological approach to construct a typology of ayahuasca visions from the perspective of cognitive psychology. He notes that despite the significance of the "extraordinary subjective experiences the brew generates in the mind" research of ayahuasca has typically relegated phenomenological analysis to the wayside (Shanon 2010:31,32). Shanon's typology and its visualizations is analyzed from a "structural, as opposed to a contentual, point of view" (2002:3). He notes that anthropologist have primarily been interested in analyzing how ayahuasca is utilized in cultural contexts. However, anthropologists have been utilizing and refining a phenomenological framework for some time (Throop 2003), with some working out how to best study psychedelic experiences specifically (Harris 2019). For example, a recent study conducted by Christoffer Stuveback took the ontological stance that the experiences his informants had with spirits were interactions with entities that had their own agency and characteristics, and that "the conditions under which these entities come to be as agents are connected to certain cultural variables," specifically the Catholic iconography mixed with Indigenous spirit-world beliefs (2015:2). As a matter of fact, Reichel-Dolmatoff back in 1975 was making the connection of the Tukano art motifs and hallucinations under the influence of ayahuasca, describing "how these ambiguous visual experiences are subjected to projective interpretations based on the cultural inventory and environment" with the shaman acting as the interpreter (Vickers 1977:370). Thus, I assert that anthropological inquiry is uniquely situated to analyze how cultural settings shape expectations for social beings and therefore experience itself, as well as critically engage with processes in which individuals revisit these experiences through memory and integrate them into their lifeworld and communicate them to others. With this study I aim to further this dialogue.

2. Theoretical Framework

The study of psychedelic experiences presents a number of significant challenges to analysis due to their "ineffable quality" (Harris 2019:116). Indeed, the experiences individuals have while participating in ceremonies are powerful, deeply personal, and profound. Not only do they include awe inspiring and beautiful hallucinations, but typically respondents emphasize spirituality, personal insight, and transformation that often leave them at a loss for words. Although these subjective aspects of ayahuasca are vague and ambiguous, they are absolutely crucial to any analysis of its use. I maintain that "experience" is by a large degree social in nature. As such I propose utilizing an anthropological framework that focuses on the cultural contexts that shape the contours of experience, how those contexts provide meaning making mechanisms, and the ways these contexts can offer a potential stage for individuals to communicate the story of their experiences to the world. I will draw from Michael Jackson's conception of the migrant imaginary and utilize Desjaris and Throop's notion of phenomenological modification to analyze the ayahuasca experience of the foreign tourist. No experience is ever unmediated by cultural mechanisms, or free from social patterning. As such, anthropology is uniquely situated to contribute to the study of the psychedelic experience by incorporating these ambiguities and complexities into analysis.

Phenomenology

Phenomenology, put simply, is the scientific investigation of experience. The key concepts that I will utilize in this phenomenological framework are provided by Robert Desjarlais, Jason C. Throop, and Michael Jackson. First, experience will be conceptualized through an anthropological framework. As such, experience is not defined merely as a collection of sensory inputs filtered through biological and cognitive processes but is largely dependent upon cultural processes and environmental contexts. This conceptualization of experience also includes a temporal aspect as there is a difference between reflection on past experiences, experience of in the moment action, and projections towards future action and experience. Throop points out that we must be cognizant of the "temporal orientation of our informants when engaged in, recollecting, or anticipating social action" as these different orientations will reveal different kinds of experience "aligned with such descriptors as 'fragmented', 'coherent', 'disjunctive' and 'conjunctive'" (Throop 2003:235). It is stressed in this study that the methodology relies heavily

upon the narrative analysis of informants as they consider their past experiences, as opposed to extended participant observation of in the moment action. Special emphasis is given to clearly define this temporal aspect among informants. There is a difference in how one describes an experience in the distant past versus the recent past, "a retrospective glance that entails the plotting of beginnings, middles, and ends over the already elapsed span of a delimited field of experience," or if they are projecting their expectations towards future events (Throop 2003:234). Keep in mind also that there is also a difference between informants embedded in the embodied field of experience as they tell their tale, and the informants that have a great temporal and physical distance from this field.

I utilize the concept of "phenomenological modification," defined by Desjarlais and Throop as "acts by which social actors take on differing attitudes…when relating to objects of experience or life," which provides a lens through which we can analyze the social actor that adopts different viewpoints or even incorporates seemingly contradictory ontologies into their worldview and practices, in this case the Western and Indigenous conceptions of healing and spirituality (2011:88). Throop sites Edmund Husserl as illustrating the power of this concept with a thought experiment, asking us to focus on a word written on a page absent of the intention of meaning we typically associate with written words to "realize that the entity (the visible marks on a piece of paper) is still present" yet lacking in the meaning we prescribed it earlier: "we apprehend it, but we no longer understand it as something endowed with linguistic meaning" (Throop 2015:77). Similarly, the psychedelic experience is a vastly complex chaotic experiential object to be shaped and imbued with meaning through cultural processes.

Rather than conceptualizing the individual as a "unique self that remains stable over time," Jackson provides another useful theoretical tool with the concept of the "migrant imaginary," defined as "our human capacity for coping with changing situations," in which our "psychological multiplicity or plasticity" is "the creative and adaptive expression of sociality itself" (Jackson 2015:300, 301). Jackson identifies some key characteristics to this conceptualization. The migrant imaginary has the ability to change their orientation towards events, adapt to other people, other societies, or change one's own life course, all potentialities that exist within every person (Jackson 2017). These concepts will be utilized in a framework that allows for an analysis of individual actors and their radically different ways of being in the

world, how strategies for self-organization are utilized, how the exploration of novel ontologies are available for the individual agent to grasp, and how their stories are communicated in a social realm. To illustrate these phenomenological concepts in reference to the ayahuasca experience, Evenga Fotiou asserts that in Indigenous cultures there exists "a very specific geography and structure of the other worlds shamans visit in their trance, a structure that is learned during their apprenticeship" whereas Westerners, in a "Jungian manner…interpret their visions as manifestations of conflicts in their subconscious mind" as opposed to its traditional place as "a healing force for the community" (2010:133). Essentially, the cultural construction of the ayahuasca experience represents a fundamental phenomenological modification. However, despite an emphasis on the personal individualized experience of healing and illness that the Westerner may approach the ceremony with, the migrant imaginary will none the less often find no difficulty in incorporating aspects of Indigenous spirituality into their world view.

This emphasis on individuality presents its own problems to analysis as Western conceptions of individualism often color academics expectation of how to define experience. Tim Olaveson in his study of the rave experience proposes that the notion of experience itself is a "deeply coded" cultural concept that reflects our own individualist cultural values in the West of "experience for its own sake" that removes analysis far away from important cultural contexts (128:2004). Following this framework, Robert Desjarlais critiques the "romantic view of pure experience, relatively unconditioned by culture or cognition" (Jackson 2015:294). No human consciousness exists as an island. The strength of phenomenology in an anthropological framework is a recognition of the *intra*-subjective with the *inter*-subjective aspects of experience. Phenomenology is the scientific investigation of experience, but individual experiences are shaped by and imbued with meaning through cultural contexts, social action, and an ongoing dialogue between conscious actors. Phenomenological anthropology takes account by emphasizing concepts such as embodiment, lived experience, intersubjectivity, space and place, and critical events (Jackson 2015:93). The subjective experience is not merely the product of an individual consciousness performing cognitive operations in response to sensory inputs but is the result of a collective network of social consciousness as they interact in space and time. All of our experiences, both with physical objects in the world and with other social beings, "entail a foundational inter-subjectivity" in which individual "subjectivity itself is deeply intersubjective in nature" (Dejarlais and Throop 2011:91).

The Psychedelic Event and Experience

Therefore, the conception of experience as a singular bounded event taking place within the confines of a single ceremony is too narrow for the purposes of this study. Any event, especially significant spiritual experiences, play out in social contexts by social consciousness and are continually revisited and re-examined by the future self. Human life is "temporally structured in such a way that our past experience is always retained in a present moment that is feeding forward to anticipate future horizons of experience" (Dejarlais and Throop 2011:88). The psychedelic event is one of such intense and overwhelming stimuli that putting the chaos to words is a difficult task that often leaves one wanting, with accounts being left incomplete or partial. The researcher, and the person conveying the experience, can only hope to provide an approximate explanation and description of what was seen and felt and thought. During the event itself, the person is subjected to the limitations of perception and attention, which are fleeting and fickle. Jackson describes a kind of unstable "oscillation" of the individual mind between public and private or "egocentric and sociocentric extremes" (2015:294). Immediately after any given event, the individual is subject to the limitations of memory, language, available narratives, as well as the social expectations of a given audience. I propose that this is not merely the individual conveying the experience differently depending on the social contexts, but is actually the individual orienting themselves to the experience in different ways, taking new meaning from the experience depending on these contexts. These issues are exacerbated by the nature of the psychedelic experience in all its ambiguity and complexity. For example, how can one possibly hope to accurately describe the experience of an ego death, a total loss of one's sense of self? No one, neither the informant through memory nor the researcher through questioning, has access to the pure unmediated raw psychedelic experience, if such a singular personal event can even be said to exist, let alone be made available in its entirety for scrutiny. The experience itself cannot be communicated "in some pristine or authentic form" (Gubrium and Holstein 1998:163).

Narratives and Agency

Emphasizing the social elements of communicating experience means analyzing the significance of narratives in human relations. Michael Jackson provides the roadmap by framing storytelling as political in nature, emphasizing "interexperience" and the agency of the individual in asserting

control over their experience through storytelling (Jackson 2002:12). Through the action of telling stories of past experience, the individual is "no longer to live those events in passivity, but to actively rework them" through dialogue with another and within their own mind, asserting a kind of creative authority over one's life experience by acting as author and editor (Jackson 2002:15). As will also be explored, specific social contexts and narratives have drastic effects on the individual subjective experience of ayahuasca. Often "individual actors shift between differing attitudes in the context of their engagements with their social and physical worlds" (Desjarlais and Throop 88:2011). Subjective experiences are given meaning through the social realm, and contexts affect experience, but this is not a clean and clear process as individuals move between different modes of being and are capable of operating under sometimes seemingly contradictory ontologies. Jason Throop sites Mattingly's critique of experience that states that "narrative imitates experience because experience already has in it the seeds of narrative" (Throop 2003:221).

The relationship between narratives, individual experiences, and active storytelling are thus dynamic in nature. Miller et al. site in their study of the narrative elements among women methamphetamine users that "narratives are more than a simple retelling of a particular event or post hoc (re)interpretation of one's behavior; instead, narratives may also shape and guide future behavior, because people tend to behave in ways that agree with the self-stories they have created" (2015:70). Jackson's approach in *The Politics of Storytelling* frames storytelling as a strategy for transforming the private or individual experience into public meanings (and vice versa), and that storying telling is a "vital human strategy for sustaining a sense of agency in the face of disempowering circumstances" (2002:14,15). Jackson's examples focus on extreme or desperate situations, such as violence, warfare, and the plight of refugees. However, this analytical lens can be applied to seekers of therapy, as noted the primary allure for the ayahuasca ceremony as codified in the healing narrative, often in response to personal trauma or illness. In emphasizing the agency of the individual in regard to illness narratives and trauma, storytelling becomes a "coping strategy that involves making words stand for the world, and then, by manipulating them, changing one's experience of the world" (Jackson 2002:18). The individual actor has the ability to exercise free will to engage with novel strategies and narratives, or to place themselves in new social environments. Lévi-Strauss and his notion of the "bricoleur" proves useful for analysis as the participant in the ceremony assembles what he refers to as an

"intellectual bricolage" utilizing "whatever is at hand" to construct and communicate the ayahuasca mythology (1962:11).

Narratives and Performance

An anthropological analysis of the ayahuasca experience must include the performative aspects of narratives as they play out in embodied space. This includes the ways in which actors dynamically engage with the storytelling process, not as passive recipients of a narrative that imposes structures on the raw psychedelic experience, but as active agents utilizing cultural tools to derive meaning from the experience among other social actors: "stories are neither the pure creations of autonomous individuals nor the unalloyed expressions of subjective views, but rather the result of ongoing dialogue and redaction within fields of intersubjectivity" (Jackson 2002:22). Shana Harris in her study of a psychedelic drug treatment center focuses on the narrative aspects of the psychedelic experience in the face of their "ineffable quality," and how "the psychedelic experience is *re-created narratively* for potentially therapeutic ends" [emphasis mine] and that there is a therapeutic value to those narratives (2019:116). Jennifer M. Levy further elaborates, depicting illness narratives as "intersubjective, emerging from negotiations between the narrator and interlocutor" that are performative in nature and occurring "in the context of community and culture" which have the potential to "create future possibilities" (2005:14).

The participants engage in the performance of the healing narrative through the ritual with the shaman and the plant spirits. Stephen Beyer frames this performance as a drama that includes the participants, the shaman, the spirits, and the plants, in which the "stories are not told so much as acted, embodied, played…actions acquire the formal and artistic qualities of the narrative-drama, suspense, risk, adventure, surprise, plot, a sense of the whole, and especially a sense that *something significant is happening*" (2010:39). The drama of the healing performance unfolds in the ceremonial space between these actors. The shaman engages the audience in which they will "*go into the patient's body and carry away the disease*," while the spirits themselves act as "active participants," all against the disease or illness that itself has a presence (Beyer 2010: 25-28).

And so, narratives note only provide the means to organize and make sense of the ceremony after it is done but sets the stage before the participant ever ingests ayahuasca, as well as provide a

stage where the drama plays out. Christoffer Stuveback's study at a healing center in Peru shows how altered states of conscious are "patterned" prior to taking the brew in regards to the cultural contexts in which they are consumed by outlining what is expected to be perceived and what is to be designated as significant, setting the stage for interaction with spirits, demons, and the divine during the ceremony, heavily influenced by Christian iconography (2015:35). Storytelling is itself an exercise in making meaning. The act of communicating the experience is significant, as it is a process that is deeply human and necessary for functioning in the social realm. When those stories are not reflected back by others close to them or within their community, an incoherence occurs that interrupts the individual's perception of psychological well-being; in extreme cases, such as following a transformative or arduous spiritual experience, one can remain trapped in a liminal state of being and experience a "spiritual crisis" (Lewis 2017).

To succinctly summarize, my theoretical approach will bring together narration, experience, and action in embodied space, aspects that exist in a mutually influential matrix of relations that conscious actors occupy, in which I will give primacy to no single node as having a central determinant function on ultimate outcomes. No pure distilled individualistic experience exists in a vacuum absent of social processes, and stories are "emergent narratives" that are "not told so much as acted" and embodied in space as an ongoing process, a dynamic dialogue among individuals in the social realm (Levy 2005:13). It is also useful also to clarify that the concept of "experience" may indeed incorporate a plurality of "experiences" that exist at different levels of near and distant experience, the clear, immediate and intimate, and the abstracted, complex, and vague (Geertz 1983). These are combined together within informants' stories in the context of the interview, from the micro experience of tasting the bitterness of the brew, to participating in the ceremony, to the grand narrative of the entire ayahuasca journey. Additionally, I must stress that my research does not focus on a single embodied space, but rather a broader globalized community. On one hand, this blurs the lines of the analysis due to its wide reach. On the other, I believe it illustrates the contingent nature of narratives, and indeed the concept of experience itself, applied over time and space as actors move between significantly different socio-cultural contexts. A common community that is truly global is forming around ayahuasca usage, with all the ambiguity and complexity that such a process would imply. Through this process, multiple narrative trends are ascertainable.

3. Methodology

This study is a qualitative analysis of the experiences of the ayahuasca tourist. I conducted long form semi-structured interviews and engaged in countless casual conversations with a wide range of individuals occupying different positions on the globalized ayahuasca network, with a primary focus on tourists. Additionally, I gathered ethnographic observations by embedding myself in the environment of Iquitos, Peru occupying the role of the foreign tourist myself, informed by interaction with online communities. I approached, but never fully, become a participant observer. In occupying the environment as a tourist, I was targeted for advertisement of ayahuasca consumption and occupied ceremonial spaces but did not partake of the ceremony myself, for ethical and methodological reasons that I will elaborate.

Location

I chose Iquitos Peru as my field of study after identifying it as a nexus of interaction in global ayahuasca tourism. Despite the practice being known to tribes in Columbia, Brazil, Ecuador, among others, the ayahuasca boom is particularly affecting Peru. On the search site Ayaadvisor.com, which is a repository for rating retreats, there are roughly 70 establishments in Peru alone, with less than 10 in each surrounding country. When pursuing forums and groups online it became apparent this was the central hub of international ayahuasca, with the first annual conference dedicated to ayahuasca being organized there in 2005, attracting over 200 visitors consisting of variety of people including Indigenous speakers, shamans, and scientists (Fotiou 2014:161). Analyzing the pilgrimage to Peru by embedding myself in the environment serves multiple purposes. It allowed me to meet contacts who are embedded in the process of ayahuasca tourism themselves, to observe how they orient and navigate the environment, as well as too see how I myself am interacted with as a potential customer to be advertised to. I was able to observe how the globalized ayahuasca culture permeates the environment and gave me opportunities to experience the field opening up and revealing data that would otherwise be unobtainable, experiencing firsthand the surprises and discovery that only fieldwork can provide. It is one thing to hear the informants describe the power and all-encompassing nature of the sounds of the jungle at night, it is another to be there yourself. I seized the opportunity to travel to various locations around the urban periphery, including two lodges that offer ceremonies. One establishment was a small operation just outside Iquitos, and another down river from the city of

Nauta in the Amazon Rainforest. This establishment was located next to a Shipibo village that offered a variety of services to tourists such as jungle hiking tours, which I partook in with several others who were to engage in ceremonies there. This opened my methodology up to multiple avenues for data collection beyond formal interviews to include observations of the environment as well as natural conversations, in which people could more freely tell me their stories.

I explored the local area to collect ethnographic information about the general environment which has been adapting and evolving in response to a boom in ayahuasca tourism, for which there was much material evidence. Meeting people in this environment allowed for more short form conversations in public with tourists as well as those 'in the know,' and opened up possibilities to collect observations of the tourist dynamic as it played out in space. David Wästerfors argues that the observing scholar acts not merely as an interviewer, but as a "witness" that applies theory to the field with first hand observations of other people as they engage in their activities; "'being there' and witnessing are the foundation" (2018:315).

Sampling

Having decided that occupying the space myself was a necessity, I had to identify an entry point to the field. After facing barriers to entry into various institutions that provide ceremonial services, I opted to search accommodations and found a host who specifically advertised their situatedness within the ayahuasca network. Following conversations with this initial informant, I utilized snowball sampling as a means to find more interview subjects related to my "in," which proved fruitful as my host was well connected within the community. Part of my host's job was introducing newly arrived tourists to retreats and shamans, which connected me to multiple people, including a translator who then in turn took me to interview curanderos.

I attempted to account for being limited to my initial contacts network in two ways. First, I allowed myself to become immersed in the tapestry of the social environment, conversing with guides, tourists, tour operators, and so on. Second, prior to my arrival I had arranged formal interviews with two foreign practitioners, one who runs a large scale ayahuasca retreat and another operating a small-scale lodge, found through contacts in internet forums. Interestingly however, in a serendipitous turn that illustrated the ayahuasca community as a network of interconnected individuals, my host personally knew each of the informants I had arranged

interviews with prior to our introduction. The time frame of nearly one month was quite limited, but this mixed sampling methodology none the less allowed me to delineate the contours of the ayahuasca culture and identify some dominant narrative elements with my interactions with tourists, long term participants and volunteers, hired facilitators, local shamans and practitioners, and business owners.

Interviews

I conducted a total of seventeen interviews. Nine of these interviews were long form in which audio was recorded and transcribed, with a total of eleven individuals, two of which were pairs (two local curanderos and a foreign couple attending a retreat). Three informants were foreign individuals that worked closely with ayahuasca: one operated a full-scale retreat, another owned a smaller personal establishment, and one was employed at a retreat. The remainder were foreign tourists participating in the ceremony. In addition to this, I also conducted eight interviews with multiple facilitators and ceremony participants, recorded with handwritten notes. Many more informal conversations took place with a wide variety of people during my one month stay in Iquitos, often recorded with jotted shorthand notes.

Considering the highly subjective nature of psychedelic experiences and the difficulty in communicating them to others, I followed Evenga Fotiou's lead in striving to "develop a more intuitive way of communication based on their common or similar experiences" (2010:67). For example, establishing a mutually intelligible system of reference to define what the psychedelic experience actually is was a key aspect of the majority of my interviews. Gubrium and Holstein provide guidance with their insight regarding the importance of the local conditions of storytelling, framing the act as "narrative composition" in which the story is "an ongoing process of *composition* rather than the more-or-less coherent reporting of experience"; narration is constructive, and mutually so, "a way of fashioning the semblance of meaning and order for experience…organizing experiential "chaos" into coherent and decipherable forms" (1998:166). The informant, the environment, and the interviewer are all integral and mutually influential characters interacting in the process of the interview. When we view the interview "as a dynamic, meaning-making occasion…different criteria apply" to the subsequent analysis, especially when framing interviews as an inherently cooperative effort of meaning making between interviewer and subject (Gubrium and Holstein 2011:3,6).

One must keep in mind that often times the communication of the experience may be referring to events that took place in the fairly distant past, in which the informant has time to re-experience the event, contemplate its meaning, pick out relevant aspects deemed worthy of communication to a researcher, while other aspects fade from memory. Two long form interviews were conducted with individuals whose ayahuasca experience took place many years prior. Other informants had psychedelic experiences that were very recent and were in the middle of processing what may be a transformative or otherwise foundational life event. This has important implications for how the individual communicates their experiences, given the process of contemplation and integration. The individual does not have access to the experience in its essential entirety, and doubly so for the research attempting to gather data on it, therefore this analysis will be framed as how the individual communicates the event or experience to me, how they interpret it, the tools they use to give it meaning. The question of "what happened" is given many more layers of nuance to consider with the theoretical framework I have adopted.

The formal interviews were conducted in a semi-structured manner with an interview guide covering several broad topics. The questions include the individuals introduction to ayahuasca, reasons for traveling to Peru specifically, back ground experience and familiarity with the subject of ayahausca, experiencing the ceremony, descriptions of visuals and feelings during the ceremony, aspects of healing and expectations brought to the experience, questions of choosing where to consume ayahuasca, and the appeal of a particular shaman or establishment. These topics were allowed to flow organically allowing for alterations depending on if I was interviewing a participant or a retreat owner, two individuals with drastically different orientations toward the subject. For instance, a tourist will be in the position of choosing where to go or may be concerned with finding an "authentic" experience. I strove to ask open ended questions while at the same time striving to keep the "push of inquiry" in service of my research questions (Gubrium and Holstein 2011:6).

For example, individuals who have just experienced the significant psychological stress of the ceremony will almost certainly give different answers compared to after they have had time to integrate the experience. My position not only as a researcher but as an outsider to the process likewise colors the interaction. In some instances, when conversing with individuals directly leaving their first ceremony experience, one can see the process of narrative composition in real

time as they think deeply and ruminate on their experience in their conversations with me, and sometimes feel that they are engaging in the service of communicating about ayahuasca to the broader public through me, for example.

Storytelling is given form "through the interplay of narrative composition and the local conditions of storytelling" (Gubrium and Holstein 1998:163). Casual conversations, for example, provided a different kind of data in occupying the various cafes and bars in comparison to discussing what is a difficult or transformative experience within the confines of a formal interview. Conversations in casual environments allowed for a more relaxed atmosphere in spaces that act as way points for people coming or going to ceremonies, spaces where stories are naturally traded. This kind of data was often gathered within a group interaction as tour groups generally would gather at these places pre or post ceremony. In interpreting this data, I take note from Wästerfors in pursing an analytic process that is not purely inductive, "but, rather, empirical research that communicates with theory and previous research" (Wästerfors 2018:315).

Barriers to the Field

I encountered my first barrier to the field in choosing which environment to conduct the study. My initial interest was the ayahuasca ceremony itself as I was interested in observing how the ceremony played out in space. How it is conducted, how the space is built or 'embodied,' observing the actors from the shaman to the participants to the tertiary facilitators and other workers that all contribute to the functioning of the space as a place of healing. My notion is that the embodied space ceremonial space as an integral aspect to the healing process beyond just the simple consumption of a drink, a hypothesis that I would attempt to deductively evaluate. Thus, I envisioned my ideal situation being one in which I could occupy the role of participant observer by volunteering at an organization as a ceremony facilitator, or in some other capacity. Facilitators attend ceremonies and assist individuals with their experience during the process, which can be challenging due to potentially extreme psychological or physical distress. In an altered state of conscious the capacity for panic or general agitation is increased and is commonly paired with intense physical reactions.

Many retreats that can afford to staff their accommodations, especially when conducting ceremonies with large groups, will hire facilitators that will assist with these issues when they

arise, and I figured this was my in. However, many places, from small scale operations to full scale retreats tend to expect a commitment beyond what I was able to provide. Due to limited funding and a time frame of one month, I was not able to meet requirements to be a volunteer at any organization I contacted. There are also programs available that one can purchase at some retreats to undergo a training with the plant medicines, but these packages were prohibitively expensive, not to mention the act of purchasing a package may have presented a conflict of interest. Additionally, it was decided between me and my supervisor to not partake in the consumption of the brew to avoid thorny ethical issues considering the legal status of ayahuasca in Sweden, as well as the potential dangers of consuming an unregulated hallucinogen. This, along with the ulterior motives of gathering data for research, compounded my designation as an outsider with goals not necessarily aligned with a retreat oriented towards treating clients.

After filling applications and emailing various institutions to little success, I broadened my search to include Facebook groups dedicated to ayahuasca and began coordinating with other people through email. This was my real introduction to the ayahuasca community. Data collection and analysis essentially began here as I was identifying barriers, authorities, gate keepers, and the norms of discourse. Following the advice of those I communicated with online, I had made a few contacts in the city of Iquitos that agreed to do interviews. I decided to travel to the city of Iquitos myself to conduct ethnographic research in the city and observe how ayahuasca tourism has intersected and influenced the built environment, allowing my contacts to lead me where they may. What did this city have to offer, and how does ayahuasca make up the tapestry of its environment?

Experiencing the Field

What initially seemed a barrier worked to my advantage. My interest in ayahuasca tourism became broader in scope than a single ceremonial space. Ayahuasca tourism has fundamentally altered Iquitos as the built environment has become strikingly oriented towards the practice. Furthermore, the question of conducting a pilgrimage to the far side of the world for the ayahuasca ceremony is made even more pertinent considering that Iquitos, although fairly urbanized, is the largest city in the world not accessible by road. The extra commitment to access makes this question even more intriguing as Peru itself occupies a special exalted place in the New Age mindset. This is an active process that is spurred by the state of Peru, which sponsors

projects to promote tourism within the nation state territory, consciously utilizing Indigenous identity by transforming it into a globalized commodity. Macarena Gómez-Barris illustrates how this plays out in New Age contexts as infrastructure is constructed for the purpose of providing access to cultural heritage sites such as Machu Pichu, facilitating the inflow of international visitors. An advertisement campaign that filters cultural identity and Indigenous history through a process of "mystification" adding an exotic veneer to attract potential visitors (Gomez-Barris 2012:71).

My host Evelyn is a local born in Iquitos who is involved heavily with the medicine and acted as a valuable contact by connecting me with others, as well as an informant with a unique perspective. Following the lead of a relative, she became interested in practicing the medicine and has traveled around the world to different retreats across Europe as well as regularly volunteering for weeks at a time in the jungle. Hers was a valuable perspective on how the landscape of Iquitos has changed over the decades in response to the ayahuasca boom and the introduction of a multitude of foreign actors and interests.

I spent the majority of my time on the popular boulevard facing the waterfront where the Itaya River meets the Amazon, a short walk from my lodgings. Daily I would take an early walk to the boulevard before the heat became too oppressive to sit at the various cafes attempting to meet people. Tour boat operations lined the river side, recruiting tourists for trips to see the pink river dolphins or get taken to lodges and retreats. The area is heavily frequented by tourists and contains a number of hostels, European style cafes, tourist shops, tour operators, street merchants, even a casino. One particular upscale restaurant, the Fitzcarraldo, is modeled after the Herzog movie of the same name about a mad rubber baron and his exploits in the Amazon, a strange allusion to the bloody history of the rubber trade repackaged as an attraction for wealthy tourists. Ayahuasca permeates the cultural environment of the boulevard; all of the restaurants I frequented had a special menu for the ayahuasca diet, and the servers would begin their interaction by asking if I was preparing to take ayahuasca. Every souvenir shop and street merchant had a variety of ayahuasca jewelry on sale, each shop showcased the intricate geometric Shipibo patterns across a variety of goods including tapestries, shirts, backpacks, and so on.

At night, the boulevard comes alive with large crowds of locals, tourists, street vendors, entertainers, and musicians. Spending time in restaurants and bars led me to meeting dozens of individuals involved in ayahuasca in one form or another. For example, one late night I met a young man at a bar, a veteran seeking to treat his PTSD. He was wearing a shirt adorned with the Shipibo patterns, describing how he left the city center and met a shaman on his own to purchase the clothing, and was about to set out to a retreat. Multiple times I would catch a group of individuals returning from a retreat at one of the popular restaurants, excitedly recounting their experiences. This is a central hub of interaction in the ayahuasca network, and while there were many foreigners to interact with, there were also many merchants and spokesmen eager to interact with me as a potential client. There was a population of individuals that act as connectors initiating contact with clientele and transferring them to business connections they know. This is how I met both my personal guide and translator, as well as a lodge owner. If the individual does not personally deal with ayahuasca, chances are good they know someone. While conversing with a street merchant and telling him what I wished to study he told me "wait here five minutes, I know someone who is a shaman." My impression is that there exists a contradiction of fierce competition between small scale practitioners as well as an economy of cooperation and favors in which potential clients are passed around and profits are shared. The result is that if you express an interest, no matter how vague or passing, those canvassing the streets tend to be eager to seal the deal immediately. After becoming known to the regular merchants and salesmen on the strip, I would still be pitched to daily for trips to the jungle. It became an everyday ritual where a particularly persistent salesman would prompt me "are you ready to go for a boat ride to see the pink dolphins yet?"

Considering the competition for clients on the boulevard, a problem I was confronted was "how discerning should I be with who I choose to talk to?" Often, I would allow myself to get swept up and carried along through the environment, to be open to its surprises and potential discoveries. A prime example is my tour through the Belen Market, a maze of narrow streets that are densely packed with an infinite variety of goods from the Amazon with crowds of people crammed together shoulder to shoulder. I had met a man who was a local and we began to chat. He claimed to be a knowledgeable tour guide, pulling out a tattered journal with reviews handwritten by clients, complete with group photos. Before I knew it, I was being taken on a guided tour of the market, with the tacit assumption that he would be compensated. He cautioned

me to stick close and not pull out my phone due to thieves, and lead me through the crowded mud filled aisles, navigating among the crowded space packed with countless stands of butchered animals, food, and drink. Eventually he led me to the medicine aisle, saved for last, tucked away amongst the hundreds of other stands. Bottles filled with various healing agents included what was allegedly the oil distilled from the fat of Amazonian animals, ayahuasca perfume, which was quite pleasant to smell, and the rapé tobacco which one snorts for an uplifting effect, among countless other bottles, herbs, oils, and substances. Free samples of Mapacho tobacco and smelling the various perfumes left me feeling quite light-headed. This experience revealed to me an aspect of ayahuasca I had not considered, the processing, refinement, and presentation to consumers outside of the ceremonial contexts, and its incorporation into other materials such as perfume.

By a chance meeting with a tour operator on the boulevard, I engaged in a pilgrimage in miniature with several other foreign tourists, taking a long car drive to the city of Nauta where we loaded onto a wooden long boat that took us down river to a lodge that sat on the edge of the Amazon Jungle. In the neighboring village a shaman lived that would conduct a ceremony with my fellow tourists the following day. We bonded together with our guides as they took us on tours through the jungle, showing us the variety of wildlife and edible vegetation in there. I sat in the room where the ceremony was to take place the following night, observing and conversing with those preparing to experience it. Falling asleep in a hammock in the stilt house next to the river, lulled by the all-encompassing sounds of the jungle, I too felt the grandeur and mystery of the environment described by my informants, without having consumed the brew. It became easy to imagine the powerful effect the jungle has on the participants experience. Traveling to Iquitos and being open to this kind of experience introduced me to informants and revealed data that would be impossible to gather otherwise.

Limitations and Challenges

My primary challenges and failures regarded getting access to the field. However, once in the environment, and with the pressure of limited time, I felt I had to get a handle on conducting field work in a foreign environment and organize how best to pursue my goals while learning by doing, as it were, and follow any potential lead. There were days where it felt as if nothing significant would occur, I would sit at a restaurant or bar hoping to strike up a conversation.

Other days an entire group of participants fresh out of a ceremony would be willing and eager to talk. Often the mid-day heat would become so oppressive that I would opt to hide in my lodgings analyzing my notes until venturing out into the cooler evening or wait for one of the many common bursts of rainstorms to occur. I maintain that my occupation in the environment was a crucial necessity and revealed things to me that would have been quite simply impossible otherwise, in comparison to say, conducting long distance interviews or analyzing retreat websites. For a time, I had the ability to experience navigating this network of ayahuasca myself, at times becoming lost, confused, or swept along, as can happen to any foreign tourist.

Another significant limitation is that many experiences are being expressed in the context of a one-on-one or sometimes group interview, not observed as they play out in the ceremonial space with me as participant alongside my informants. In writing about experience, I am not practicing experiential anthropology as a methodology but rather utilizing phenomenology as a theoretical lens. In practicing experiential anthropology, the focus is the lived the experience of people, with the anthropologist entering deeply into the shared experience and the processes one is studying. Tim Olaveson in his study of the rave experience sites Edith Turner as delineating the characteristics of experiential anthropology in which the researcher becomes "a bit more like them" keeping themselves open, and "willing to change" (Olaveson 2004:134). Empathy can be considered a methodological approach, in which the researcher attempts to position themselves as closely to their informants ritual experiences as possible, feeling what they feel, despite never being able to occupy or fully understand their worldview (Fotiou 2010:62,63). Limited as I was in space and time means that this kind of intensive empathic participant observation of the ritual was not possible. I am left with is the story of the informant as they convey it to me, and my experience traversing the broader environmental and cultural contexts in which the ceremony takes place. However, I would argue that I can retain a degree of empathy for my informants and their story despite my position, perhaps even bolster it by being free from my own subjective experience with the psychedelic, thus resulting in my analysis being less colored by my own ceremonial experience. Indeed, the ceremony is often deeply personal and profound, not to mention incredibly subjective (and inter-subjective), and heavily dependent on set, setting, and general context.

Me approaching the ceremony with the mind of a researcher seeking to obtain data is fundamentally different than a participant approaching the ceremony seeking therapy. Shana Harris in her study of ibogaine healing rituals states that she is not convinced that partaking of the psychedelic itself is a necessary part of the ethnographic research of psychedelic use; if the psychedelic experience is indeed "subjective, personal, and non-generalizable," does the researcher partaking of the brew themselves alleviate the challenges of understanding the informants experience (2019:131)? As Clifford Geertz asserted, the anthropologist cannot fully perceive what their informants perceive, so analysis is guided "not by imagining myself someone else…but by searching out an analyzing the symbolic forms-words, images, institutions, behaviors-in terms of which, in each place, people actually represented themselves to themselves and to one another" (1983:58). Many of my informants explicitly said that writing about ayahuasca without having experienced it myself is a strange exercise. "It's like writing about sex if you've never had it," one informant accosted me. While absolutely valid, I view this attitude as valuable data in and of itself, as this barrier was revealed between the in-and-out crowd specifically because of my lack of personal experience. Me as the audience, an academic with no experience with ayahuasca, colors the response of my informants, but does not invalidate it.

Terminology

Evenga Fotiou notes the negative connotations that are connected with the word "tourist," likely due to the wealth of studies regarding the negative effects of tourism (2010:119). I will be utilizing the word tourist to refer quite simply to foreigners traveling to Peru to partake in the ayahuasca ceremony, who are from a wide variety of different cultural contexts. The phenomenon of ayahuasca tourism is exploding in popularity across Northern Europe and North America, and much of the literature utilized for this study reflects that. All of my informants foreign to Peru were from these locations. Therefore, the terms 'Indigenous' and 'Western' are employed in the broadest possible sense. Indeed, the blending of spiritual practices not only includes New Age sensibilities, South American Indigenous shamanism, and scientific materialism, but also concepts from Asian traditions such as chakras and energy centers of the body (Fotiou 2010:137). As far as I can tell very little has been written about contemporary ayahuasca tourism in Asian nations, yet according to informants and web searches for practicing shamans the ceremony is becoming established in countries such as Taiwan, and indeed the

globe over, though unevenly. For these reasons I am avoiding strict categorization of groups in the following analysis. As noted, Indigenous healing practices and world views vary widely over time and are subjected to processes of evolution, cultural exchange, and globalization. Likewise, foreigners do not uniformly view the world through a lens of scientific materialism. In the same way, Mestizo is an ambiguous and negotiable designation, one which will be used to denote a broad cultural category as opposed to a bounded ethnic one (Luna 1986:15).

The term 'New Age' is employed extensively throughout this study and is defined by its ambiguous nature, featuring a plurality of beliefs and practices. New Age values are often characterized as an individualistic personal spirituality that is defined in opposition to typical notions of Western medical practices which are framed as limited by their emphasis on the material, while New Age beliefs utilize language of energies, the inner spirit, and self-knowledge to address internal issues, allowing for personal growth and transformation (Fotiou 2012:21). The New Age represents a bricolage that pulls from a "vast pluralism" that incorporates practices from a "radical diversity of spiritual beliefs" from Taoism and Buddhism to Indigenous shamanism to psychotherapy and so on (Gearin 2016:200,201).

Ethical Considerations

The informants referred to in this study have pseudonyms with respect to their privacy and provided informed consent to being studied. Hallucinogen use itself is a sensitive topic, due in large part to issues of legality. Additionally, informants were regularly describing deeply personal experiences with trauma or illness, which I strive to respect as well as protect the privacy of. I was explicit in my intentions as a researcher during interviews and would encourage dialogue with informants, allowing them to ask questions of me, and omitted specific points of data when requested. Sensitive data gathered that related to the processing and smuggling of the hallucinogen was destroyed due to the illicit nature and out of concerns for protection of informants.

In the following analysis, drawing from interviews and ethnographic data gathered primarily in Iquitos, Peru, I will argue broadly that the ayahuasca experience goes far beyond the singular psychedelic event or events that take place during its ceremonial consumption and is much broader in scope than the hallucinations it stimulates. Utilizing a phenomenological framework, I conceptualize the individual as a migrant imaginary capable of creatively adopting different

attitudes and orientations towards experience. Narratives not only shape experience but also possess a utilitarian character allowing for a degree of control in the orientation towards experience both in the future and to events that have passed.

4. Prior to the Ceremony

In this chapter I will illustrate how the individual is prepared for the ceremony through introduction to the cultural narratives of New Age spirituality and Indigenous practices which blend to create expectations of personal healing and transformation. Primary elements include New Age discourses of personal healing, orientations towards spirits and a spiritual realm, and the conceptualization of the Amazon and its inhabitants as occupying a place of spiritual significance. This discourse operates within globalized commerce and includes a moral formulation of the foreigner as a consumer supporting Indigenous practices. The elements I have chosen to emphasize serve to illustrate the process of phenomenological modification that the ayahuasca tourist undergoes, the shaping of expectations and thus the experience of both the ceremony and the ayahuasca journey as a whole. In narrating to me, informants tend to frame their experience as a fractured and partial though still logical and temporally oriented narrative. A major trend noted by Evenga Fotiou (2010) in the narration of the ayahuasca experience is the emphasis of the journey, a contemporary spiritual pilgrimage in which the person is spurred to travel to distant lands, heals, transforms, or gains some kind of personal insight, then returns different in some way. This is a journey that begins before entering the ceremonial space, and indeed before one ever steps foot on a plane, as the migrant imaginary begins the process of socialization through the discursive structures of contemporary globalized ayahuasca culture.

New Age Expectations of Healing

The focus on inner transformation through ayahuasca consumption is connected to growing interest in the "neo-shamanist" spiritual movement that incorporates an enormous range of spiritual and healing practices in North America and Europe, often falling under the umbrella term of "New Age" practices (Stuckrad 2002). As noted previously I will use the term New Age broadly to represent a bricolage of individualistic spirituality, pulling elements from a wide variety of traditions and practices from Taoism and Buddhism to Indigenous shamanism to psychotherapy and so on (Gearin 2016:201). The New Age expectations for healing and spirituality are filtered through the processes of globalized commerce and made available as products for purchase, largely through online portals. Generally, most of my informants attended larger retreats with their own websites that include packages ranging from a single ceremony to

weeks long packages, complete with yoga classes, guided meditations, or Kambo Tree Frog ceremonies. Kambo ceremonies are frequently offered at these retreats, depicted as another ancient Indigenous healing or cleansing practice, in which the poison from the frog is burned into the skin stimulating vomiting or purging. Shamanistic entrepreneurialism has provided the means for global consumers to participate in ayahuasca ceremonies with a new professional class of shamans, a kind of "spiritual commerce" at designated commercial retreats, which has implications for further standardizing expectations for the ritual that is increasingly syncretic, incorporating a wide variety of practices (Wallis 2003:60). However, these larger scale retreats are by no means the only places one can partake in a ceremony, as individual shamans will also canvas the streets of Iquitos.

There is a plurality of avenues for one to find entry into the ayahuasca network of knowledge. The tourist navigates a wide variety of services and retreat websites, participates in online communities and forums, seeks authoritative sources through articles, YouTube channels and books. The individual is not a merely a blank slate for which narratives of healing and spirituality are imprinted, but rather they are an active agent that engages in an extended process of assembling meaning from various sources and authorities, representing the "vast pluralism" of New Age values and practices (Gearin 2016:200). The patterning of the ayahuasca experience is not one that *imposes* meaning so much as it offers a wide variety of tools from which to actively construct meaning.

One of my first interviews was with a man named Benny, which took place outside of the context of the Peruvian environment and serves to elaborate these concepts. He described to me his introduction to ayahuasca and his experience with the ceremony, which took place roughly a year and half prior. Benny is a former marine, dissatisfied with the treatment he was receiving for symptoms of PTSD. He was introduced to the concept of ayahuasca as a form of therapy through a podcast covering the subject. Having experimented with psychedelics in the past as a form of self-therapy, and being open to spiritual experiences, the twin aspects of treatment and spiritual mysticism described in the ayahuasca ceremony were appealing. The beginning of the journey was framed as a failure of Western medicine to adequately treat his illness, spurring him to utilize psychedelics as a means of treatment:

> "I was having multiple symptoms of PTSD that was diagnosed by the VA [Veteran's Affairs] and they attempted to treat with Mirtazapine…that just made me absolutely miserable it was the emptiest I've ever felt in my life it was like I was soulless and I immediately stopped that and it made me wary of any other treatment the VA had to offer… So when I started experimenting with mushrooms and stuff I noticed a benefit that would last weeks or months following the trip…I was looking for a change in me instead of treating something that's not changing in me."

Looking for a more fundamental or deep healing experience, as opposed to simply taking a medication, is a common notion expressed by many of my informants, as is the ceremony as a viable alternative for healing offering what Western medical practices neglect. When asked about introductions to the subject of ayahuasca, the bricolage of these narratives is evident. Often individuals will site a wide variety of sources and authorities that have appeared in popular media, from podcasts to news articles or interviews, or popular literature on Indigenous ayahuasca culture. The appeal can be contextualized as a broad "neo-enchantment" movement of New Age sentiments which fundamentally challenges notions of Western medical practices and their epistemological commitments to scientific materialism, which spurs people to seek alternative methods of healing (Seddon 2014).

Treatment for trauma is a major trend in the discourse of ayahuasca culture. A man I met at a bar on the boulevard of Iquitos expressed nearly identical sentiments as Benny. He was a former marine suffering from PTSD at a loss for how to adequately treat his symptoms, and out of frustration from lack of adequate treatment he found his way to Iquitos to participate in a ceremony for the explicit purpose of treatment. Evenga Fotiou notes that healing narratives often include a crisis or critical event that spurs the journey or pilgrimage (Fotiou 2012:21). Indeed, many of my informant's stories reflect this pattern, particularly those that are making the investment to attend a multi-day large scale retreat. For another example, one particularly hot afternoon in a popular café I was having lunch and two foreign men introduced themselves after overhearing me speak English. Excited to hear that I was interested in studying ayahuasca experiences, they enthusiastically described the weeklong retreat stay they had just completed. One of the men explained his struggles with depression and addiction that had led to him traveling to Peru. Along with PTSD or trauma, the treatment for addiction is another major

element of ayahuasca healing discourse and is gathering legitimacy in formal research (Thomas et al. 2013). Like the other informants, this man had little success in dealing with his illness in his home country, leading him to Peru.

While these informants and several others expressed the desire to treat clearly defined psychological issues, the often-explicit critique of Western modes of healing also brings with it more ambiguous spiritual issues that go beyond a specific biological or psychological illness, such as a general disappointment with one's direction in life or general disposition. In conversations with participants and especially foreign practitioners, the expectations of Western capitalist society were regularly cited as an element of what spurred them to the pilgrimage. This included descriptions of disappointments with life trajectory or career paths, or a general dissatisfaction with life, as if they were "missing" something. For example, a facilitator named Fredrick that was employed at a large retreat described just such notions that resulted in him committing himself to the practice of ayahuasca rituals as a fulltime occupation. We met one night at a restaurant on the boulevard in Iquitos, when during dinner I witnessed a large group that had just finished their stay at a retreat excitedly recounting their experiences. Fredrick, a young man sporting multiple scars on his shoulders from Kambo tree frog ceremonies, was enthusiastically thanked by the jovial group. After they were done with their hugging and goodbyes, I asked if he would be interested in describing his work to me, and he happily obliged. Fredrick told me how he made the decision to pursue ayahuasca after losing his job and suffering a crisis of meaning: "I decided that I needed to find something bigger than me, something that can realign me, with my heart you know my mind and highest purpose." His story did not involve a specific illness so much as a general dissatisfaction with his life that resulted in him turning to ayahuasca culture:

> "I was kind of at the crossroads, rough relationship… I lost my job lost the apartment on the street, move out, I was in a different country I didn't have many friends, so I was at probably my lowest point. Then I started drinking alcohol and just not caring, not having one single care in the world, and that got me even more confused and more in trouble, instead of me getting myself together. And getting more in touch with my inner self, I got a little bit more further away from my spirit."

Whether psychological illness or a generalized crisis, the foreigner often frames their issue as originating from within, often coupled with New Age notions of the spiritual. Despite its varied use, there seems to be agreement that ayahuasca use in the Indigenous context involves a much more communally oriented, as opposed to an individualistic usage of ayahuasca that is commonly emphasized by contemporary ayahuasca tourist culture. Fotiou describes how illnesses or other problems (such as interpersonal quarrels or economic issues) in the Peruvian context are externalized as sorcery or spirits, and the "ayahuascqueros manipulate these forces and treat external cosmological as well as social problems," that are embedded "within the complex network of intertwined wills" (Fotiou 2012:7). These intertwined wills included humans, animals, the plant spirits, and the jungle. According to Gomez-Barris' article critiquing the New Age tourism taking place in South America, this represents a "clash between native ontologies" and the highly individualized accumulation model of late capitalism that reorients the ceremony away from its collective social orientation to the narrative of personal individualized healing, spurred by the discourse of nationality and private property imposed by post-colonial structures (Gomez-Barris 2012:70). Thus, despite incorporating elements of Indigenous spirituality, New Age beliefs tend to retain an individualistic orientation.

Additionally, the filter that individuals pass through to get to the ceremony is one that is draped in these individualist New Age terms: spirituality, transformational, personal growth, all of which is achieved through communion with the sacred plant, or mother ayahuasca, as shown by Christine Holman's analysis of an ayahuasca website revealing a combination of individualized commercial New Age discourse (2011:98,99). These discursive elements act as a phenomenological modifier, orienting the individual towards an experience of internal and deeply personal healing, whether for a specific psychological illness or a crisis of meaning. As one foreign practitioner described it, and indeed many other informants, explicit emphasis on intention and accepting the power of these ideas is necessary, approaching the ceremony with an "open mind." The more invested one is in the potential for inner healing, the "deeper" one is able to heal. Ayahuasca, due to the potential of visceral bodily reactions, is not well suited for typical group use environments such as raves, and its use as a "party drug" is generally looked down upon as the normative discourse repeatedly focuses on this deep and personal healing.

On the Existence of Spirits and the Spiritual Realm

As New Age beliefs pattern expectations towards internal personal healing, I will also make the case that an individual's disposition or attitude regarding beliefs in spirits has a fundamental effect on the experience of the ceremony. The normative discourse of ayahuasca tourism furthers this orientation towards belief in spirits that behave as active agents which participate in the ceremony along with the shaman and the individual tourist. Clear distinctions between 'Western' and 'Indigenous' ontologies of healing and spirituality that are common in academic literature are not as clearly defined in my informant's stories. This is an ongoing process of phenomenological modification in which the migrant imaginary assembles meaning from a variety of sources to organize their experience both prior to the psychedelic event and after. This process is often a continual one as informants that have had their ceremonies many years prior are still contemplating the experience and orienting to it in different ways. The New Age narrative elements of energy and healing paired with Indigenous conceptions of spirits and plants as active entities goes a long way to patterning expectations for the psychedelic experience. Additionally, the Western biomedical perspective is not outright rejected by my informants but tends to be incorporated into their world view. Indeed, academic literature abounds purporting the potential biomedical viability of ayahuasca and more broadly psychedelics to treat psychological illness, which many tourists have engaged with prior to arrival. Western medicine with its emphasis on scientific materialism, although often critiqued, is not thrown to the wind but is used further legitimize the conceptualization of ayahuasca as a form of therapy, as part of a bricolage of various narratives that ultimately orients the participant towards inner healing.

Informants lay on a spectrum between the acceptance of spirits as real to ayahuasca visuals existing solely as chemical reactions in the brain. The majority fall somewhere in between, however, with the notion that it is useful to keep an "open mind." Indeed, a common element is an emphasis on the value of devoting one's self to the ceremony as a means to experience it more fully. A pattern noted in responses is that these beliefs are far more prevalent in those that work with the medicine, the retreat owners, the practitioners, and volunteers. This indicates that further embeddedness in the culture of ayahuasca results in furthering the acceptance of these beliefs as one continues the process of enculturation. On the more affirmative end of belief in spirits, multiple informants described what they perceive as the failings of Western science to discover

what other cultures have known for millennia, that the spirit realm has the potential for eventual scientific verification. For these individuals, there was no contradiction between two mutually opposed ontologies, just different aspects of the same reality. Two of my informants (both foreign practitioners of ayahuasca ceremonies) outright stated that spirits are quite simply *real*.

I met Debbie through a contact on a Facebook ayahuasca forum. She moved from a Western country to Peru to establish her own practice and told me of how she came to work with ayahuasca, a life story that was kept recorded in a journal that included entries depicting events where spirits would contact her, guiding her to different locations around the globe to study under shamanic teachers, eventually leading her to Peru to start her own practice. Over tea in her lodge, located a quick boat ride outside of Iquitos, we conducted the interview in a large room that serves as a place to conduct ceremonies. The space emulated the traditional Amazonian style housing with thatched roofing and wide-open circular area allowing for the breeze to pass through, and outside the various medicinal plants, including an ayahuasca vine, grew in her garden.

She spoke to me about spirits as matter of fact, as visible existing agents that interacted with those that came to see her for ceremonies. The spirits not only affected her client's psychology and wellbeing, but followed them in their daily life, sometimes physically attached to them, asserting their influence, and causing issues that could be addressed through ceremony. Clients were expected to "break contracts" with these spirits as means to be removed of their negative influence. She described an individual that came to her addicted to heroin, whose girl friend had died from an overdose, and that "her spirit which was not liberated at all ended up making him use all the time. So she was sitting on his back getting the experience of the high from him so she could still connect to the morphine and the heroine." This spirit was visible to her, and she explained to him that "you still have this lady sitting on you." Her client agreed, saying that when he used the drug, he would envision his deceased girlfriend sitting in the corner with him. In order to heal the person from this addiction, he had to break contracts and liberate her spirit. This is not so far removed from Western forms of psychotherapy and the concept of "letting go," of trauma, but in the context of a ceremony.

Responses varied a fair amount regarding the dichotomy between the inner and outer world, and divisions between the spiritual and normal reality. Beyer notes that the "two realm assumption" itself is "based in a naïve metaphysical dualism…many shamans simply deny this dichotomy," with the traditional mythology being that the ayahuasca allows one simply to see what is hidden (Beyer 2010:37). A common psychedelic trope in the West utilizes the language of "tripping," implying to take a trip to some realm outside our normal reality. Many individuals will describe traveling to another plane of existence, an affirmation of metaphysical dualism. However, at the same time, there is the common phrase of "opening the third eye" that is utilized frequently, keeping with the Indigenous perspective of allowing one to see what remains hidden. In my data, this language is often used interchangeably, with informants sometimes referring to leaving to the spirit world, or opening up their perception to see spirits, or turning their vision inward to go "deep" within themselves all within the span of the same conversation. Fredrick the facilitator described the spirit realm as a real place accessible through a portal, implying more of a dichotomy between physical and spiritual realms:

> "This is a portal, plants are a portal, you cross this portal, and you are no longer on the human side of things, you are in the spiritual realm. Everything is there, the light, the dark, entities of all kinds, everything, plants, spirits that are just curious, spirits that haven't crossed over to the other side"

Individuals that will often freely utilize the language of "traveling to a different realm" while at the same time describing the spiritual as existing around us as unseen, in a state that Western science just hasn't caught up with verifying yet. Daniel, another foreign practitioner of the medicine and the owner of a larger scale retreat that employed multiple people including a number Shipibo healers, agreed to an interview with at a café in Iquitos. Over coffee, he explained the existence of the spiritual realm by referencing Western science. This, he explained, was a conscious decision to appeal to skeptical Westerners. He described ayahuasca as enhancing our senses which reveals the spirits to us:

> "…ayahuasca is a sensory perceptive ability amplifier. So it expands the biological limitations of our senses so that we can sense more of the world…it's very well known that we can only see this tiny tiny little bit of the frequency of light that exists, scientists have shown on this big scale all the entire spectrum of light that we can determine exists through scientific

equipment but the biological limitation is less that 1%, that means that over 99% of the world is invisible to us…And that to me is a pretty succinct and scientific description of how that is possible."

Likewise, Debbie described the communication of plants to individuals as something potentially verifiable by Western science, referencing the jungle scene around us:

"the plant shares its consciousness with you and then you start to see that these plants are all talking to each other and they all have connections and this little hummingbird that comes to say hello here is part of the plants information system you know…all of that communication is happening on a very subtle level, I mean science is catching up with it but you know when they say oh we need to have these special bionic implants or these special stuff to get this…we actually can do it our brains are capable of processing this, we just shut it down so thoroughly."

The divide between the ontology of spirits and the ontology of scientific materialism often stressed in the literature seems to be of no concern to these individuals, resulting in a combination of the two; both delivering a different kind of knowledge, a different perspective about the same reality. While I found the existence of spirits and the spiritual realm more readily accepted in practitioners of the ceremony, the majority of informants that were participants were decidedly more ambiguous on the subject, sometimes making contradictory statements. Despite this ambiguity, many stated they at least saw the value of keeping an "open mind" and approaching the ceremony with "intention." This was likewise combined with attitudes regarding the limits of Western knowledge. To illustrate, I had an interview with a man named Joseph who upon hearing what I was researching expressed interest in contributing his experience, which took place a full five years prior to the interview. He described to me his perspective on open mindedness:

"I mean I don't know what DMT is, I don't know how forests work and like…no I'm open, I'm definitely open, like what do we know really? What do we know, like science tells us some things, there is a lot of things that we don't know. The second time around I was more open to those ideas…when I go the next time, I will be one hundred percent."

The implication here is that the disposition one has will result in a different experience. Having the chance to do it twice, he approached the second ceremony with a more open mind which resulted in a more positive outcome. While maybe staying ambiguous on the exact reality of spirits or the spiritual realm, keeping yourself "open" to these ideas is what counts in how it will affect the experience. The importance and power of narratives are recognized by the active agent, as narrative creation allows the means for which they can assert a degree of control over their life world. Intention and openness are significant features of New Age discourse. Even the more skeptical among my informants generally agreed of the possible psychological benefits of intention, stating that if one goes in with a fully open mind, if not guided by a shaman but by perhaps a psychologist, the outcomes could potentially be more positive than consuming the ayahuasca alone in one's bedroom.

This illustrates the degree to which the experienced is shaped by norms and narratives, but also the degree to which the migrant imaginary has the agency to actively shift attitudes and grasp pieces of various cultural narratives to impose meaning and make sense of the experience as a whole. This ranges from a full acceptance of the reality of spirits and the spiritual realm to seeing the value in "keeping an open mind," or striving to adopt a specific world view can potentially result in positive outcomes. What seems like a contradiction between Western and Indigenous depictions of reality often find a comfortable synthesis in peoples world views. Novel narratives of healing and the spiritual "may confound or call into question our ordinarily taken for granted notions of identity and difference, and so push back and pluralize our horizons of knowledge" (Jackson 2002:25). As will be explored in the next chapter, being "open" to the existence of spirits and the spirit realm prescribes a special significance to the hallucinations experienced in the ceremony, often depicted as visions of spirits conveying profound messages or knowledge.

The Mythic Jungle

New Age motivations for the ayahuasca journey represent "the attractiveness of anything that is perceived as the antithesis of Western civilization: pre-industrial, pre-modern, natural, exotic, spiritual, sacred, traditional and timeless," which includes an "archaic mystic" (Fotiou 2010:127). The emphasis on the setting is another significant narrative element regarding the consumption of psychedelics. With ayahuasca culture, this extending to the broader environment of the Amazon Jungle itself, which is often described in juxtaposition not only with the broad

concept of the "West" but also with the urban environment, where noisy confusion, car exhaust and crowds of people interrupt the space. These distract from the spiritual experience that can be had in the jungle, which is typified as peaceful and surrounded by nature, and thus closer to the spirits. Macarena Gómez-Barris in her study on New Age tourism presents a foreign informant that owns a successful spiritual retreat in Peru who describes the location as occupying a "strong energy vortex…which would naturally attract people" noting that she felt called to Peru for her work (2012:73). This New Age language is common in commercial ayahuasca discourse, depicting the jungle in Peru as sacred and holding a kind spiritual energy within it while claiming that occupying that environment is an integral part of the spiritual experience. The mythology of the Amazon being the origin or birthplace is likewise a significant feature. Fredrick, having practiced ceremonies in Europe and in Peru, described it so:

> "…this is the birth place of medicine the Amazon Forrest, everything is ayahuasca here, as soon as you walk in the jungle, the air you breathe, the sounds you hear, all the plants are all around you. This is the place in the Amazon, where the tradition of ayahuasca comes from. Here you have the authentic healers…this is the birthplace of the cultural tradition."

Indeed, the environment in many ways makes the experience. My host Evelyn in working part time as a facilitator with multiple retreats has participated in dozens of ceremonies. A local born in Iquitos, she has worked in ceremonies both abroad in Europe and in the Amazon. One afternoon we met at a popular restaurant overlooking the waterfront on the boulevard to chat and drink fresh blended juice and try a few items from ayahuasca diet menu. She described the differences between European practices and the ones that take place in Peru. In the urban environment there is "too much energy" that is distracting. The ability to be secluded in the jungle, especially at night, to focus on one's self was important. She showed me a video she recorded of a ceremony that took place in Europe, conducted during the daytime in which the participants were dancing and singing, as opposed to laying or sitting on a mat as is typical at Peruvian retreats: "I couldn't believe it, everyone was like a child in that room." She insisted there was not the possibility for a profound experience in an environment like this, only the possibility of seeing colors and visions, but not of "deep healing." According to her, the jungle shaman are "more serious" in conducting the ceremony than their European counterparts. A local

ayahuascero I conversed with concurred, likewise citing the noise of the city interrupting the ability to "have the proper concentration to visualize."

In fact, the noise of the jungle itself stands out as a significant and overwhelmingly positive memory among informants and was a common narrative element in the majority of my interviews. Indeed, during my stay at a lodge at the edge of the Amazon, between the river and the jungle, swaying in a hammock in the darkness, it is difficult to not be filled with a sense of awe while enveloped by the consistent buzz of a vast and mysterious jungle that seems brimming with life and energy. The secluded and remote nature of the typical ayahuasca lodge only further reinforces the New Age notions of deep personal introspection and transformation as one is far removed from their normal contexts. As Benny described it, just the sense of being far removed from the legal structures and authorities that prohibit the use of psychedelics in the United States is a comfort in and of itself. Daniel likewise asserted the importance of the environment, describing how working in the Amazon along with the Indigenous tribes there in an environment that is "immense and important," allows one to foster a greater awareness or consciousness. The distance is an explicitly important characteristic:

> "Part of the beauty of doing a retreat in the Amazon Rainforest is that you leave your entire life behind. So whereas you are home you are still surrounded by everything that most likely in some form was contributing to the reason why you are trying to be healed."

Authenticity and Respect

Finding the right shaman or retreat is a central aspect of preparing for the journey, with New Age ideals elevating Indigenous knowledge as providing a mythical ancient healing practice. The commercial aspect of purchasing a "real" traditional ceremony has been roundly critiqued as an exploitive relationship, with foreigner consumers judging what constitutes an "authentic, ethnic Other" (Holman 2011:106). However, I contend the relationship is highly nuanced. In the purely practical sense, having a professional or an authority present to guide the experience in what is generally advertised as an arduous and challenging experience makes the individual feel safe. A major narrative element surrounding the mythology of ayahuasca is that of challenge and danger, and South American shamans in the New Age discourse are elevated as experts, carriers of sacred healing knowledge. Stories abound in online forums and news reports of people taken

advantage of by fraudulent shamans, and sexual assault from shamans is of a real concern, not to mention the deaths of tourists in what remains an unregulated and broadly expanding practice**.** These were specific concerns cited by multiple of my informants. Additionally, notions of authenticity were often shifted to the general environment as opposed to specifically defined cultural groups, as my informant Fredrick described:

> "Here you have the authentic healers. I'm not saying the healers that travel are not authentic, they are, but there are people doing good work out here, but being here, being the fact that this is the birthplace of the cultural tradition."

Daniel elaborated the importance of a shamanic authority guiding the ceremony in the environment of the jungle, describing the cultural cues going into a visit to the doctor's office, how everything to the uniform of the doctor to the set up of the office shapes the experience: "there's this meaning…which helps us to believe that whoever is gonna walk through that door knows something…You've already become more open to whatever is about to happen."

The issue of cultural authenticity in my informants was rather vaguely defined, and often defined in opposition to environments that felt "commercial." When posed the question of cultural authenticity directly, many informants formulated the idea of a desirable ceremony not as being "authentic" in the sense of a clearly defined ethnic group, but instead in general terms non-Western, non-commercial, or less urban. Joseph, for example, explained to me that between the two ceremonial spaces he occupied, the one that was "less commercial" was more enjoyable and "real" experience, taking place within a small community of family members as opposed to a formal retreat. Benny, who also attended multiple ceremonies at different locations, described the feeling of being at an "off the grid retreat" as more desirable in comparison to a retreat in an old hotel in an urban environment and a larger group.

Issues of cultural sensitivity are also deeply intertwined into narratives of ayahuasca tourism. Beyond pure self-interest, looking for an ayahuasca experience that is more "real" or in the hands of experts also has a dimension of cultural respect; the idea that by purchasing the ceremony, the consumer is contributing to salvaging a dying way of life. The degree to which this is the reality is up for debate and the subject of wide critique, as is the problematic aspects of cultural "authenticity." Regardless, the issue of respect and desire to "do good," akin to the contemporary green consumer movement, is an ever-present characteristic with ayahuasca consumers. The

importance of taking measures to protect Indigenous practices or contribute to Indigenous communities is often emphasized as a selling point by retreats; a guarantee that by participating in a ceremony you will be contributing to the preservation of a way of life that is in danger of disappearing, ensuring that a reciprocal, mutually beneficial relationship is taking place. There are indeed institutional and organizational examples of such steps being taken; NGO's such as the Ethnobotanical Stewardship Council (ESC) have the goal is to protect local people and ensure the receive the benefits of booming tourism, partner with many operations (Gurvicius 2015:15-16). Some white practitioners or owners of retreats refuse to adopt the word shaman even if they are involved directly in facilitating ceremonies and will only higher local shamans. As an example, Joseph expressed to me his regret for not taking the ceremony more seriously. He admitted to being cynical regarding the spirituality of the process, and vowed that in the his desire to try again he would strive to commit himself to the ideas of Indigenous shamanism not only as a means to get more out of the experience, but to also properly respect the culture and the process. Implicit in the critique of Western modes of consumption and commercialism is the lack of fundamental spiritual aspects, making the narrative of cultural respect for, and contribution to, an ancient healing practice a particularly powerful selling point.

Enculturation to the ayahuasca journey begins with introduction to the discourses of New Age and Indigenous spirituality, which blend a bricolage of many different cultural narratives and practices. The common elements are an orientation towards deep personal healing, the existence of spirits, and the elevation of the practice of the ceremony and the environment in which it takes place as occupying a mythical spiritual status. As will be further elaborated in the following chapter, these narratives set the stage with specific expectations for how the ceremony will play out in the embodied space, acting as phenomenological modifiers that shape ultimate outcomes for what defines ayahuasca experiences.

5. Experiencing the Ceremony

I will now present my results regarding the experience of the ceremony itself, elaborating my findings on "what happened" during the ritual experience in the context of the informants' story. Specific aspects of the ayahuasca experience are emphasized as important, such as the centrality of the ceremony and the role of the shaman, as well as the challenging nature of the experience with its psychological stresses and sometimes severe bodily reactions. I find that the ceremony is a fundamental narrative element of the ayahuasca experience, acting as the central stage where the ritual drama unfolds, a critical event in the informant's story where the journey reaches its apex with intense emotions, visceral bodily reactions, and profound insights or transformations. Therefore, I assert the ayahuasca ceremony is a fundamental aspect of the experience, and that consuming ayahuasca absent of the ritual process (as well enculturation to specific narratives related to the ceremony) results in a *fundamentally* different outcome. A variety of tools are available through which the participant attempts to structure and communicate these experiences in a collaborative dialogue between audience and storyteller. Despite the emphasis on individual healing and the archetype of the Western Person characterized as self-interested and hyper-individualistic, the drama of the ceremony is none-the-less highly communal in nature. The ayahuasca experience is a collaborative social process that includes an array of actors including the shaman, the individual tourist, and the plant spirits, all interacting in a dynamic embodied ceremonial space.

The Centrality of the Ceremony

The contingent nature of the ayahuasca experience is exacerbated by a wide variety of ceremonial contexts. As noted, the typical ceremony often includes other activities such as yoga, meditation, floral bathes, or taking the poison tree frog secretions "Kambo," at a multi-day retreat. Some retreats are large scale and offer standard amenities, while others consist of only the most basic lodges. Some tourists will take it upon themselves to search for individual shamans that practice independently from a larger organization. The most common aspects of the ceremony, particularly within the Mestizo and Shipibo practice, involve small groups of people taking their turn drinking the brew and laying on their mat to contemplate their journey, guided by a shaman. The shaman will typically bless the brew and the space with Mappacho tobacco smoke, and sing their icaros, songs that are individualized to each shaman with the capability of

directing or controlling visions for the participant, and serving to call forth spirits to protect the ceremonial space (Beyer 2010:69).

For many reasons, the ritual consumption of ayahuasca in a structured ceremony is of central importance. It is not just the consumption of the brew by itself that is of appeal, but everything around its consumption that is important to the user. Nearly every informant, even those skeptical of spirits or of a spiritual realm all agreed that the ceremony is an important, if not absolutely essential aspect of the ayahuasca experience. Consuming ayahuasca away from a ceremonial space, say, alone in one's room without the guidance of a shaman or otherwise professional authority, would be a fundamentally different and undesirable experience. Precedent is provided through Mary Douglas arguing on the socially constructive, structured aspects of drinking alcohol, framing it as cultural expression "in so far as it always takes the form of a highly patterned, learned comportment which varies from one culture to another" (Douglas 1987:4). In much the same way, Beyer frames the structured ceremony as a shamanic performance which engages the participant and their bodies as an active part of the social healing narrative with the shaman and the plant spirits, a process that plays out in a communal space. This process conveys the sense to its participants that "something significant is happening," thereby encouraging individuals to follow conduct as they "move in and out of action" throughout the ritual, with specific implications for how the event is experienced (Beyer 2010: 25-28).

When asking individuals, both tourists and foreign practitioners, if they would do ayahuasca outside of the ceremonial contexts or if it is possible to experience the same effects without the ceremony, the answers were overwhelmingly:

1. I would not do it without a ceremony.

2. I would prefer to do it in the Indigenous context with a shaman

Some expressed a desire to get closer to the "real" experience, while others insisted the ceremony was absolutely central to healing. Fredrick, my informant that acted as facilitator at a large resort, described the necessity of having a knowledgeable shaman present to assist in navigating the spiritual realm:

> "…that realm you know, and what the shaman does is he provides the security and safety. Because he's coming as somebody who has dieted with different plants for years. So through his diets he can call the protection from plant spirits to animals jaguars, bears, whatever. And call protection into this room so that no dark force can come in and mess with people, it's for real, yea man it's kind of scary."

Note the implication of danger and the need for protection that a knowledgeable shaman can provide, beyond just the aforementioned practical safety aspects to include spiritual protection as well. Contact with the spirit world can be a dangerous prospect. The shaman sings their icaros to commune with the plant spirits and call them forth for healing, but also for protection (Beyer 2010:67). The shaman is a central actor, someone with experience that has the ability to guide the experience effectively, acting as the coordinator of the performance and the carrier of the plant knowledge (Beyer 2010:173). The retreat owner Daniel connected the centrality of ritual action in relation to effective healing to the consumption of any medication:

> "…to me the tradition is paramount, it's absolutely essential, and it's the thing that we lack in Western medicine, you know Western medicine has no tradition of use. You get written a prescription you go to the pharmacy you buy it yourself, there is no procedure there is no like ritual there's nothing, you just take. And I think that is one of the things that we can learn so much from this medicine practice, is how to enhance the effectiveness of our medicines by including a ritual procedure"

This is in line with the Weberian notion of an overly rational world that is disenchanted, experiencing the loss of magic coupled with the increase of secular institutions and bureaucracies of knowledge (Jenkins 200:12). The outlined New Age discourse are a direct challenge to this supposed disenchantment of the West, and as outlined implies the importance of approaching healing with a degree of intention. The appeal of the ritual, however, has its material aspects as well. In reference to the commercialization of the ceremony, Beyer notes the how "remarkably receptive" the globalized practice is in its ability to incorporate treatments for modern diseases but also modern images, Western musical instruments, and practices such as tarot cards – even noting that realms visited by shamans during the ceremony include imagery of spiritual hospitals with plant spirits as doctors performing operations or jet planes providing protecting the shamans

(Beyer 2010:339). My informants describe the material effects of cultural strands combined in the ceremonial space: icaros are paired with guitars or other instruments and songs from popular media, yoga and meditation is practiced prior to the ceremony, and multiple of my informants took part in floral and steam baths. All of these elements combine to contribute to the general aura of the experience. In particular, the sounds of the ceremony are a central narrative element. The shaman and their icaros are often referred to in depictions of the ceremony as a primary highlight, as they have the power to affect the visions and hallucinations of the user.

Directing Focus

Specific aspects of the ceremony and the shamanic performance, such as the singing of icaros or the blowing of Mapacho tobacco smoke, direct the individual's perception and attention. The ayahuasca ceremony itself provides the context of incorporating the plants and the environment into the story as active agents alongside the shaman that likewise work with the individual, as revealed through the anthropomorphizing of "Mother Ayahuasca" as a guiding spirit among a whole community of "plant teachers." I argue that this framing and directing has significant implications for how the ceremony is experienced by patterning expectations, guiding attention and focus, and imbuing hallucinations with meaning. The oscillating consciousness is exacerbated to extreme degrees during the chaos and confusion of the psychedelic experience. Absent of the highly structured ritual there tends to be either confusion or a lack of any deeper significance prescribed to visions. What is important? What should one focus on? Should one clear their mind? Or should they focus on the shaman's chant? Should they focus on particular problem or illness one wants to solve? Should one attempt to interpret the hallucinations, or communicate with the visions?

This confusion was represented in an informant who signed up for the ceremony out of curiosity and was in Peru for other reasons. During my trip to the lodge accessible by an hour-long boat ride from the city of Nauta I met a young couple from Europe who were traveling to various locations in South America. Already signed up for a guided hiking trip in the jungle, they were convinced to partake in the ceremony as it was to be offered at the lodge as part a packaged deal. We conversed in the octagonal lodge space where their ceremony would take place the following evening, and they agreed to meet up for an interview upon their return to Iquitos. The ceremonial space itself was a typical traditional Amazonian structure, lifted off stilts for when the river

floods featuring large open-air rooms protected by mosquito nets. It was situated between the river and the thick mass of the Amazon jungle and provided only the most basic of amenities. The couple had been introduced to the concept of ayahuasca from popular media and were aware of some of its aspects, such as the shaman and potential for vomiting. They had little knowledge of the particulars of Indigenous cultural practices or what typical rituals are like. The ceremony began without introductions or guidance, as they watched the shaman blowing his Mapacho smoke on the brew. As the ceremony progressed, they were attempting to make sense of what was happening and feeling "awkward" about how they should be conducting themselves, and wondering "does my behavior fit the situation"?

> "I would feel it might have been better if someone did some kind of introduction and talked us a bit through it, because now I was just sitting there don't know what to do you don't know what's happening you don't know if you are doing right, am I doing this right or not?"

The dramatic experience of the ceremony can become confusing or perceived as harmful without being properly introduced or socialized for what is to take place. This has implications for the perceived safety of the brew itself. The visions themselves were described as beautiful – behind the eyelid hallucinations of animals, such as a flying whale, yet were attributed little significance:

> "I feel like I was just thinking about everything a bit too much I think, like when I saw a whale I was like oh what does this mean and then in the end I felt kind of a bit free or something because I saw animals and I was floating and in the sea and just doing my thing and it was kinda nice I felt free and a bit liberated, I don't know"

This is an example of how drastically the phenomenological modification changes the psychedelic experience. A greater degree of investment in the ceremony as a spiritual experience prescribes a greater emphasis on the content of the visions (as well as emotions and insights), and these visualizations are typically described with a degree of reverence or awe, particularly when they are conceptualized as entities interacting with the user in the ceremony, which sometimes may have very specific meanings.

The icaros and other musical elements conducted by the shamans and sometimes facilitators are often described as a highlight of the ceremony by informants. Whereas the previous informants expressed confusion, and were actively trying to translate what the icaros were saying during the ceremony, or interpret what different actions symbolized, Benny, who had a particularly profound and intense experience, described the icaros so:

> "Just the sound of their voice while under the influence of ayahuasca is very influential to your experience…the visions change with it and it's like flowing down a gentle river of their voice. But with the shaman it pulled his voice…it pulled me into like I said a stream of sound or a stream of thought or stream of psychedelic experience almost like guiding a journey…. I still had the opportunity to do some exploration on my own in my mind but if I wanted to, I could just start listening to the shaman and it empties the mind of all this other stuff I'm thinking about or other stuff I'm seeing that pulls me into this stream of experience where it's just a gentle relaxing existence."

Even with a lack of understanding about what exactly is being conveyed through the performance of the icaros, the sense that "something significant is happening" described by Beyer remains, encouraging engagement from the participant throughout the ritual (Beyer 2010:25-28). The engagement of the individual in the performance with the shaman is elaborated by Michael Fobes Brown, who depicts the shamanic performance as a "highly charged event" that is "collective and interactive" in nature, "not simply the invention of an autonomous ritual specialist" (1988:102). The participants, bringing with them their own notions of the shaman and the ceremony, is confronted by the shaman and their practice as they enact the performance together in space. Like any dramatic performance, there exists the potential for incoherence and ambiguity between actors. Daniel elaborated on the collective action orientated nature of the ceremony, describing how the shaman, acting as an expert authority, guides and assists individuals that are attempting to work through their problems:

> "I'm not saying they are just putting on a show and all you need to do is just be Indigenous. It's certainly not that way, they have been trained in an ancestral tradition that's been passed on from generation to generation they are masters of working with ayahuasca…All of my staff members have been in places where we couldn't figure out how to break through or get past it or get better. And then our teacher shows up and *snaps fingers* like makes it look so easy,

I've laughed so hard in ceremonies at how easy this guy did what I've been struggling for hours to try to do you know?"

Describing the Psychedelic

Describing what takes place during the ceremony is likewise subjected to the same cultural patterning, with the discourse offering viable narrative elements to communicate the story effectively to others. This is particularly relevant to the psychedelic experience, as qualitative research indicates the difficulty in relating the individual psychedelic experience to others is limited by what is in many ways "inexpressible" (Fotiou 2010:67, Harris 2019:116). These experiences are extremely malleable, reacting drastically to the individual's mindset, the setting and different sensory stimulation in the environment. This, however, does not mean that the endeavor to communicate is totally in vain, as interviewer and informant work to establish commonly understood words, metaphors, and symbols to describe visions, feelings, and events. Beautiful colors, geometric fractal shapes, and animal forms are all common elements to hallucinations, along with profound feelings of connectedness or "oneness" with the world. A loss of sense of self or "ego death" is characteristic of higher doses.

The available discourse not only offers tools to communicate the experience, but in turn shapes it. Narrative elements of consuming substances as described by Sveinung Sandberg and Sébastien Tutenges in their study of young tourist drinking culture illustrate the prescriptive elements that shape the experience of substance use through stories that act "as constructs that shape people's actions in the present and future" (2013:543). Much in the same way, stories of psychedelic "trips" as critical events in one's life are often circulated with their own patterns and discursive norms. These stories are colored by the aforementioned New Age rhetoric and Fotiou's (2010) notion of a modern spiritual pilgrimage, as well as specific elements of the ceremony.

The normative character of narratives is represented in the very hallucinations themselves. Informants described a wide variety of colorful visions they experienced during the ceremony as "golden visuals, golden lights like streaming in front of my eyes." Another described how "sparkles" behind the eyelids would move and morph into different animals such as octopus tentacles, then a lion head that breathes fire, or a whale. My informant Benny experienced a particularly difficult ceremony, dissolving into geometric shapes, coupled with visions of snakes.

Others described vivid scenes interacting with angelic figures conveying specific messages. Animal hallucinations and angelic figures are heavily referenced in the broader ayahuasca culture.

While Benny Shannon (2010) outlines a typology of fundamental aspects to the phenomenology of the ayahuasca experience, these visions are influenced by normative depictions of the ayahuasca experience that are ever present in the built environment of Iquitos. In all the restaurants and stands, highly detailed pictures of mother ayahuasca, an angelic figure, with colorful jungle animals, and repeating colorful geometric patterns, are present. As Beyer points out, much of the Indigenous art work representing the ayahuasca ceremony, such as the popular Shipibo Patterns (see *Figure 1*) are highly abstracted, whereas the modern Mestizo artists are much more realistic, depicting entities such as personified spirits animals and trees into the artwork (see *Figure 2*). These depictions permeate the modern globalized ayahuasca culture. He posits that these depictions of the ayahuasca experience in becoming "normative" may mean that instead of "the experience prescribing the art, the art may begin to prescribe the experience" (Beyer 342,343).

Figure 1: Shipibo Pattern **(Photo Credit: Author)**

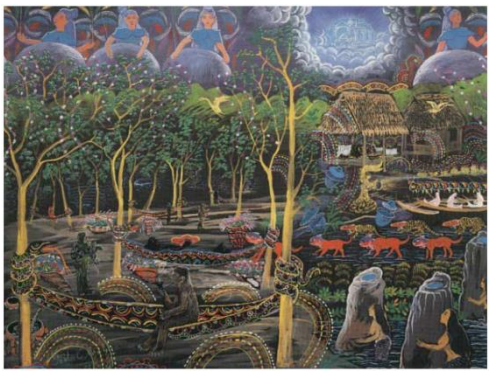

Figure 2: Vision 19: The World of The Yakuruna **(Amaringo & Luna 1991)**

These narrative elements then are part of the visible built environment and permeate the boulevard of Iquitos as an essential element of its character. More broadly, symbols and media in broader culture are often utilized to convey the experience of ayahuasca hallucinations. My informant Benny, while grasping for the means to articulate the experience, reached for mutually recognized cultural symbol (see *Figure 3*):

"Well it's definitely difficult. Yea its very Alex Grey-esque. Um. Yea man, I can't put words to that *laughs*"

Figure 3: Godself. **Alex Grey, 2012**

Fredrick likewise described his visions with the assistance of a mutually understood cultural reference:

"Have you seen Avatar? So that dream place when they are walking back in the middle of the night, walking with the plants with colors and stuff in the dream fantastical world, like wow I've never seen this, that's the feeling… It's so incredible, it's beautiful, it's majestic. It's something different from any other substance."

A reoccurring theme among informants was the inability to fully convey the scope of the experience. Notice that these references to cultural symbols were conveyed as an approximation, with a special emphasis on feelings and emotional reactions of reverence and awe over pure visual content. Many responses to questions regarding the experience of being under the influence of ayahuasca, specifically when asked about describing the visuals, were marked with extensive pauses and struggles to convey meaning, often explicitly saying that it is simply not possible to accurately depict. Even with informants that had very clear visions of interacting with spirits were stressing that their descriptions were mere approximations. The confusion of the senses, the collapsing of the inner and outer world, or outright ego death contribute to this

difficulty. Benny, whose experience became so intense he experienced what he described as an "ego death", explained:

> "Two of the more profound experience I've had with ayahuasca, one involved completely um *pause* leaving my body. Uh leaving everything as I know it, basically being a different dimension from my perspective as far as I could tell. And um being, just being. It was like I was there, there was no fear there was no pain there was no breathing there was no swallowing spit there was no puking there was nothing it was just pure awareness in this other realm."

When asked if he was still seeing visuals during this experience:

> "Intense visuals closed and open eyed um my body was geometric shapes and there was snakes crawling in and out of me and all across the floor um I basically dissolved into *pause* um I don't know man I don't know how to describe that. But it was a very intense experience."

Phrases such as intense, overwhelming, and a sense of losing one's self are all common elements. Gubrium and Holstein call the act of pausing and thinking things over while answering "narrative editing," in which the person meditates on how to shape their story while striving to be an effective communicator, acting as an editor to their story in real time (1998:170). The experience and conveying it is a process that the individual is engaged in, depending on the conditions of the environment, narrative templates available, and the audience, the story will be fashioned in different ways.

Interaction with visions as conscious agents is another common feature of ayahuasca experiences. A conversation I had with two gentlemen in a café on the boulevard on a particularly hot afternoon described their interactions with spirits. In our interaction the need to communicate what happened seemed readily apparent, a common characteristic of those leaving a ceremony. I wrote in my field journal that the older gentleman of the pair was "practically bursting at the seams" to tell me his tale, excitedly describing to me his interactions spirits that amounted to a significant transformation. He described how he was a recovering drug addict suffering from depression, and how the ceremony was a particularly arduous experience

involving intense purging. A spirit approached him in a vision and conveyed to him the message that he does not "know how to love." The message had a powerful impact, and the following day he described a "glow" about him that was noticed by the others at the retreat. This was depicted as the critical moment in his ayahuasca story in which he fundamentally changed, to such a degree that it was readily apparent to others accompanying him. These intense emotional affects and his perceived transformation were emphasized over the specific visual content of his experience.

Metaphors and Comparisons

Considering the struggle to effectively communicate the experience, and the variety of cultural and narrative tools available to do so, part of the rapport I established with my informants was my familiarity with other psychedelics, which allowed for an avenue for viable comparison. In describing the visuals in comparison to other hallucinogens there tended to be many similarities: fractal geometric patterns, and a differentiation between behind the eyelid and open-eyed hallucinations as a reliable measure of intensity. The common difference sited by many that have had high doses of ayahuasca pointed to the interaction with spirits and the stunning clarity of the visions as a differentiating factor to say, psilocybin mushrooms:

> "…you are like communicating with them [a spirit] in like a psychic manner and there's response, that never happened for me at least with mushrooms or LSD or other psychedelics. So ayahuasca I would say is unique in that sense that you can have such a truly personal experience, like interaction with spirit."

It is natural to then ask, is it the culture around ayahuasca that leads to the individual attributing the status of "spirit" to these visions? Indeed, there are rituals and retreats that incorporate psilocybin into ceremonial practices as well. Shana Harris' study of Ibogaine healing rituals, another psychedelic substance, reported that her informants experienced similarly intense visions and emotions. Regardless, it was often these other elements beyond merely the visual that went into describing the differences between ayahuasca and other psychedelics, and an increased "intensity" as well as a feeling of being more "clear-headed" in comparison to other substances. Metaphors and comparisons are an often-utilized tool to approximate the experience. For

example, in comparing ayahuasca to LSD a participant described LSD as much more "synthetic" feeling in comparison to the ayahuasca experience, which was designated as more "organic" and "earthy" as well as being more "inward looking." This may imply the experience being prescribed and patterned to a degree beforehand with specific expectations, with the emphasis on a natural treatment that engages with the spirits of the forest in a secluded contemplative setting, coupled with drinking a brew often described as "dirt" or "mud" like in nature. Often the drinking of the brew was emphasized as intensely unpleasant and bitter. One wonders what the response would be if a person's introduction to ayahuasca was in pill form, taken in a clinical setting, administered by a Western physician?

The differentiation with other psychedelic substances emphasized much more cryptic and ambiguous characteristics over strictly visual content. Ayahuasca was designated as a more natural, profound, spiritual, clear, or deep experience in comparison with other hallucinogens. This different aura or feel is illustrated in the usage of a metaphorical "deep" that the individual could travel to. Daniel the retreat owner explicitly described his reliance on the use of metaphors to help grasp what happens. The term "deep" was used describe delving further, either into the spiritual realm or within one's own mind, or deeper into the experience, as he conveyed to me:

> "Because consciousness has no end in my opinion, so it will go, there is no bottom to that ocean. And so as deep as you are willing to go, but in the case of like diving into the ocean there is always a point if you start wondering if you'll make it back or, if you have enough air, or whatever, you know everyone turns back to go back to the surface at some point"

As previously outlined, interactions with spirits were more common in informants that have had long term stays at retreats or were volunteers or practitioners. The conditioning of being embedded in the environment for longer periods, or taking higher doses multiple times over a period of weeks, coupled with intensive dieting or fasting could all shape the experience or increase its "intensity" or how "deep" one is able to go. Long term involvement with the medicine is a learning process. This is often explicit, as shamans are viewed as masters of their craft and the plants themselves are referred to as "plant teachers," holders of knowledge that one is capable of communicating with and learning from (Tupper 2002). Howard S. Becker describes

a similar process of enculturation in relation to the use of marijuana, in which the user must learn to smoke the plant and recognize its effects as something to be enjoyed: "the presence of a given kind of behavior is the result of a sequence of social experiences during which the person acquires a conception of the meaning of the behavior, and perceptions and judgments of objects and situations" (1953:235). What Becker sites as a learning process in the context of ayahuasca is a broader phenomenological orientation regarding how the visuals, feelings, and the ceremony as a whole is to be experienced. Long term involvement with the medicine and the culture of its practice beyond a one-time event furthers the phenomenological modification of the ceremonial experience through continued enculturation to a specific discourse, which has prescriptive normative properties. More than a learning process, the individual begins to orient towards different ontologies of healing and the spiritual.

Challenge of the Ceremony

A significant narrative element of the ayahuasca experience is its challenging nature. This usually centers around the bodily act of "purging," which is not merely a physical reaction but also entails significant psychological processes as well, codified into the symbolism of the ceremony. Healing in the New Age contexts typically represented as a processes of "cleansing" of negative energies or traumas, hence the emphasis on purging in its many forms – so much so that the vomit bucket is an ever present feature of any ceremony, and is a common critical event that gets discussed in interviews. While most commonly taking the form of vomiting purging also includes crying, screaming, sweating, laughing, or in some cases the voiding of bowels.

Frederick described to me that these are purged energies, things that "don't belong to you," citing specific childhood traumas he was carrying with him that were removed during a ceremony. These issues, bad memories, perceived character flaws, and traumas are often perceived as literally leaving the body through the purge in physical form. A participant, who was skeptical but kept an "open mind" described how he had heard of the concept of being able to "overcome fears" during the ceremony. He decided to try to focus on his tendency to compare himself to others and the negative emotions that caused him. He described his reaction after a puking purge: "I felt, oh well that's out of me, nice." This confirmed for him the possibility for ayahuasca, in a therapeutic setting, has the potential for treatment.

In conceptualizing the body as a symbol of society, Mary Douglas connects the margins and boundaries of the body to Van Gennep's concept of thresholds as symbolizing new statuses (Douglas 1966:141). In this way, the societal values of healing and spirituality in the context of the ceremony are codified into reactions of the physical body. The ritual drama plays out not only in the embodied space, but the body itself, where margins and boundaries act as liminal spaces facilitating change and transformation, in this case healing through the act of purging. Indeed, the most arduous ceremonies involving excessive purging are often cited as the most profound, the ones were the individual gains some kind of epiphany, transformation, or insight. The importance of an arduous ritual is elaborated by Jason Throop, who describes "sacred suffering" as "phenomenological modification that bring into being a particular sort of orientation to experience," one in which our "existential tethering to our ongoing self-experience" and the social world is interrupted, revealing to us new horizons, potentials, and limits (Throop 2015:85). This is especially so considering the all-encompassing and overwhelming effects that psychedelics have on sensory perception and mental states, coupled with these physical reactions. For example, the gentleman I conversed with in the boulevard café that communed with angels described the "glow" he retained following the ceremony, which was achieved after a particularly difficult experience "purging in every way possible," including puking, sweating, crying, and so on. He described "Mother Ayahuasca" as a "harsh teacher," that "tells you what you need to hear, not what you want to." The intensity of the experience culminated with communion with a spirit that facilitated a profound personal transformation.

Benny likewise described a profound ego-death experience as following a particularly difficult ceremony in which he vomited nearly ten times. He connected this to feelings of anxiety and his attempt to "control" how the ceremony would go instead of relaxing and "accepting everything for what it was." The difficulty was appreciated and taken as "a good lesson that you don't control things." Letting go, accepting what is happening, allowing the medicine to work, are all common elements in reference to difficult aspects of the ceremony.

Daniel elaborated on the need for an individual to approach these experiences with a particular orientation. An individual with the "optimized inner environment" would have the mentality of

being fully committed to the difficulties of the healing process, purging and all. If someone asks, "is there a way to do this easier?" it implies a lack of commitment and therefore lessens the efficacy of the ceremony, whereas the statement "whatever it takes" is an expression of full commitment. He emphasized to me the importance of intention: "thought processes directly correlates to the depth of their healing or how complete their healing is or how fast they are healed." This illustrates the phenomenological effects that enculturation to the ayahuasca ceremony propagates. By committing to the challenging aspects of the ceremony, you come to expect a transformative personal healing experience, something that requires effort to attain. Again, part of this commitment is a separation from one's old life and undertaking the pilgrimage to the Amazon.

While the purging in the spiritual context is generally depicted as a positive and necessary part of the healing, the couple I met at the lodge on the edge of the Amazon had a different perspective. More skeptical of spirituality and the viability of ayahuasca healing, they described it as feeling like a "poison," that "it did not feel healthy." Purging symbolized something entirely different: "it felt like you were poisoning yourself…I could not imagine drinking the same thing the next day." They emphasized the difficulty of drinking the brew due to how badly it tasted. Orienting one's self towards ayahuasca as a healing agent has significant implications for how the experience of the ceremony plays out, as their interpretation was a far cry from the feelings of deep healing and transformation reported by others. This is despite the fact that their ceremony included visions of animals and feelings of being deeply under the influence.

Many of my informants explicitly stressed the importance of intention, that ayahuasca is not a "cure all," rather, it is a "tool" that involves a high degree of commitment from the individual and a personal will to address whatever problems they may come with. It is not merely drinking the brew that matters. Daniel emphasized to me how vulnerability, opening up parts of yourself you are "scared" to look at, are essential to the process. These narrative strands are present in popular culture. An article from Vox depicts ayahuasca as a "brutal mirror" that "exposes the gap between who you think you are and who you actually are" (Illing 2019). The idea of a "quest" or a "journey" to another realm, of facing challenges and coming out the other end changed in some way are all elements to the broader psychedelic narrative. Psychedelic events are often referred

to in popular culture as a "trip," and taking an amount high enough to induce an arduous yet insightful journey has been dubbed the "heroic dose" by psychedelic guru Terence McKenna (Doyle 2019). To face the overwhelming psychedelic experience is framed as an act of heroic courage, one that stresses both the mind and the body but ultimately results in transformation through sacred suffering.

Communal Ceremony

Another significant narrative element involves fellow participants, whose reaction to the medicine have a direct effect on the experience of the individual. Other participants will be experiencing difficulties, purging, crying, laughing and so on during the ceremony. Afterwards, experiences are shared among participants and discussed. Group ceremonies are described both as a positive communal sharing experience while also presenting distractions and challenges, due to the potential for witnessing another participant's traumatic episodes. Benny described a fellow participant who was having a particularly bad, vocal experience and how it affected him:

> "When that girl was having the difficult time I had to, or I didn't have to, but you know I felt compelled to just explode with compassion and stuff and send good vibes her way you know and um the next day she felt or she said she felt like she was receiving support from us during the trip. And that helped her out."

Reinforcing the notion of the ceremonies challenging aspects, Fredrick described the camaraderie in facing the experience together as a group and bonding through it. Witnessing large groups return to the Boulevard in Iquitos, one could see the excited conversations between people recounting their experiences. Fredrick described it like going to war together:

> "Those people talking at the restaurant they were all shut off but then now, hugging and caring. That's the thing as well, when you go through a good process with a big group, the bond is amazing, because you know everyone is fighting their own demons, and they are doing it together, it's like going to war together, and then getting at the other end of it like we survived brother yea, so it's a big uplift."

Here the challenging aspect remains central, not only as an individualistic meditative experience but one which involves all participants as collaborators in the ceremony. Communal aspects of the ceremony extend to the visions themselves. Daniel, in describing his early experiences with ayahuasca, told me of an event that that confirmed for him the existence of spirits:

> "…very early on I was in the ceremony and I had a spirit put his hand on my shoulder, which I felt. And then I looked over and then saw this man, of course my second ceremony so I was like "my god this is crazy like how real this looks" like my eyes were open, I could feel his hand, he's looking at me, we are definitely sharing in a moment here…right at that moment my friend in the ceremony called over at me and said "Daniel, I'm looking over at you and it looks like there is a spirit standing next to you." And I was like "yea I know, there is I'm looking at him.""

This experience was described as a significant moment that confirmed for the informant that spirits are indeed real and can be independently verified by others. Benny described seeing the connections between him and other participants in the ceremony:

> "He [another participant] was describing one night that he had become this spider web that intertwined with all of us um. He said like a spiderweb of tubes or something like that. But I remember during that night I looked over at him, which was weird because I didn't look at them any other time during any of these experiences, but I looked over at him and I got this weird Donnie Darko tube on his face coming at me and it then it went into me and then I went deep into other visions and stuff. But for that split second it was like I saw what he was experiencing that night. That we just happened to find out the next day when we were talking about it."

Notice the appeal to the cultural symbol of a movie to describe the visual. Communal visions, if not evidence of spirits and visions that are mutually intelligible outside of individual people, may serve to further elaborate the collective aspects of recollection and narrative construction. In any case, individuals claiming to have witnessed the same visions interacting in space between them is a regular occurrence. Discussing of the ceremony generally takes place between participants

the following day, as they communicate what happened and attempt to make sense of the experience.

The centrality of the ceremony illustrates the psychedelic experience as ultimately a collaborative social process, patterned by discourse, specific expectations, and codes of conduct. The ritual is a performance in which the ayahuasca tourist, the shaman and facilitators, and the plant spirits interact in the embodied ceremonial space. The ceremony as it is conducted guides the focus of the participant, directing the oscillating consciousness through the performance. In describing the experience, informants utilize a wide variety of cultural tools to depict the event narratively and prescribe specific aspects meaning, most notably communion with spirits, specific visions, and the challenging or arduous aspects of the ceremony such as purging. I assert that the discourse and cultural imagery around ayahuasca not only serves to provide tools for imposing meaning and communication, but is also normative, shaping the experience of ayahuasca and its hallucinations and feelings themselves.

6. After the Ceremony

Lastly, the utilitarian character of narratives has direct implications for the integration of the experience into the individual's life, a creative reflective process that plays out in the social realm as much as the individual mind. In keeping with the phenomenological framework outlined, I will emphasize the social nature of the experience as it extends past the ceremony by analyzing the process of integration as an active exercise of making meaning through story telling. This is a process of asserting control over one's own lived experience; narratives shape experience but are also actively authored by conscious agents, an ongoing creative process in which the migrant imaginary changes and adapts to what is often a fundamental transformative experience. This process depends on social contexts as the individual tells their story within the constraints of specific conditions and relationships with a variety of other conscious actors. These contextual social variables have implications for the personal significance of the event and the degree to which one has "healed." The ayahuasca experience is not a one-time experience that is forgotten after the event, much to the contrary. For many, the experience has long-term repercussions to which the individual continually returns to through storytelling, with attempts at integration made through changes in life patterns. It is not uncommon for participants to experience a significant crisis of meaning after their ayahuasca ceremony, or to feel a "calling" to pursue new avenues of being in the world (Lewis 2008). We have already touched on this to a degree with the facilitator Fredrick, who felt he needed to change his behavior to live a fuller life, or Debbie who was called to become a practitioner. Their stories reflect a broader trend of spiritual crises or transformation among individuals that participate in the ayahuasca ceremony.

Integration

The arduous spiritual journey can continue on in the participant's life post-ceremony, as they leave Peru and attempt to adapt to intensely transformative experiences. My informants Benny and Joseph, both of whom had their ceremony multiple years in the past (one two years prior the other more than five), were still revisiting the experience, gaining new insight, and finding ways to explain what happened. Those who became practitioners and healers integrated the experience by working to embed themselves in the community of ayahuasca, devoting themselves to learning the plant medicine. This process includes a continual consumption of ayahuasca, with some of my informants claiming to have participated in hundreds of ceremonies. People

interviewed in Iquitos after their first ceremonial experience preparing to return home may indeed have immediate transformative experiences or changes, but this chapter will primarily emphasize individuals that have had extended time to contemplate their past ceremonies or have had an extended relationship with the ceremony, as a means to illustrate the ongoing and renegotiable nature of the individuals' ayahuasca story.

Following from Jackson's emphasis on storytelling I concur with Shana Harris (2019) that narratives have explicit implications for psychedelics as a therapeutic tool for their ability to organize and integrate the profound insights one can achieve during a ceremony. Nearly every informant that approached the ceremony with some kind of intention of healing emphasized aspects of positive change, ranging from fundamentally transformative and attaining epiphanies to gaining lessons, or at the very least retaining some general aura of a positive attitude. As outlined in the previous chapters, bringing the intention of healing to the ceremony, and situating one's self in an environment specifically oriented towards the process of healing is arguably just as important as drinking the hallucinogen itself, if not more so. Again, this commitment with the intention to heal or transform begins with the decision to book the flights. "What struggle did you go through to try to achieve this goal, you bought some ayahuasca online?" Daniel asked me when posed the question of the effectiveness of taking ayahuasca alone at home without a shaman, outside of the ritual ceremonial environment.

"Healing" as advertised in the ayahuasca ceremony goes far beyond merely removing an illness and returning a person to a normal state. Jennifer Levy in her overview of illness narratives sites Arthur Frank as offering the idea of a "quest narrative" in which the individual takes control and meets their illness head on as they "accept illness and seek to use it," which includes elements of transformation and growth, of making changes to one's own life (Levy 2005:22). The protagonist of the quest narrative is not "cured" but rather transcends the illness and transforms in some way. This is in opposition to the "restitution narrative" in which the individual expects to heal and become well again after being a good patient and taking their medicine, returning back to a normal state of being (Levy 2005:22). The quest narrative then is fundamentally at odds with the outlined critiques of Western medicine. It is not just taking the medicine, vomiting up the illness, and continuing on as a healed individual, it involves engaging in the process of

sacred suffering, of being shown some kind of deep truth or insight, and transforming in some way. The ayahuasca experience is an ongoing process in which the "harsh teacher" holds up the "brutal mirror" and shows you what to change, and it's up to you to apply it to your life. Fredrick described it to me so:

> "…the plant shows you what to do, you should change your life. And you feel that it's done, that the hard part is in the ceremony but no, the ceremony is actually the easy part because the hard part is to integrate, once you go back to your life to your rhythm you have to integrate the lessons you've learned, because the plant will show you how you can change things how you can live a more happy integrated life."

Fredrick's decision to become a facilitator was born from an extended process that eventually led him to Peru to partake in ceremonies. The difficulty in adjustment upon returning demands action and reorientation from the individual. Sara E. Lewis in her study of the "psychological resiliency" of ayahuasca users illustrates the difficulties in integration that foreign users can potentially face post ceremony, which may lead to what she calls a "spiritual emergency," a crisis "resulting from the intense and transformative spiritual experiences" leading to an ambiguous, liminal state of being (2008:109, 117). Minimal cultural tools are available in the West to help individuals reorient themselves after such a spiritual experience, which may cause problems with one's own perceived mental health and in turn strain relationships. She notes that her informants, when seeking treatment from Western medical professionals tended to be diagnosed as having mental illnesses such as depression, for which treatment from Western doctors did not fundamentally address their crisis (Lewis 2008:119). Western medicine arguably lacks institutional support for crises in meaning or spirituality and are often pathologized. Indeed, similar to what Lewis describes Benny related to me feelings of losing his mind upon returning home after his difficult experiences with ego death in Peru:

> "mentally I felt like I was teetering on the edge of, or already mildly lost my mind *laughs* I started to sort of deeply think about what death is and how it's something we are all gonna face and it's been something that uh I've ignored myself, I mean I was in the marines you pretend like you're not gonna die. That's how you get through."

However, this difficult period was temporary, eventually leading to a greater acceptance of the inevitability of death and becoming more opened to a "more mystical outlook on life," with alleviated (though not fully "cured") symptoms of PTSD:

> "I will say it can always change but for now I am over a year post ayahuasca and I've been um *pause* great. I mean. The ayahuasca and afterwards were sort of difficult for me mentally but I feel as if there has been a pretty big change in my perspective on life and I'm not completely out of my habits I had from PTSD, I still avoid crowds and stuff like that but um my day to day happiness is far above where it was before."

In line with the quest narrative for healing, Benny did not simply take a medicine which cured him of all negative symptoms. Rather, he undertook a heroic journey which resulted in a transformation of his lifeworld and conceptions of death. Another informant Joseph, whose ceremony was likewise many years prior to the interview, explicitly stated that he was still pondering the experience and felt as if he had not had time discuss it with others and properly. Joseph did not partake in the ceremony with the specific intention of healing a particular ailment. None the less after contemplation he felt that certain issues had indeed been addressed:

> "even though I wasn't aware of it at that time…looking back no, like years later, I could see that there were things, like traumatic things that had happened to me before that had like led me to go traveling, and maybe led me to take that, but at that time that I wasn't aware of…but looking back now I can see that it helped a lot."

The power of the healing narrative is that years later Joseph becomes more convinced of the transformative effect of the medicine as he is reoriented towards the experience. He made explicit to me the difficulty that comes with not being able to talk about it with other people, and in fact approached me with the desire to be interviewed upon hearing about my research intentions, much like the gentleman that was "bursting at the seams" to tell me his tale. Similar to what Lewis describes in her research, an incoherence between one's significant spiritual experiences and those within an individual's immediate community can further these issues or strain relationships. Benny described how his relationship with his significant other was strained as he attempted to communicate and work through the significance of what happened to him.

Joseph was still processing the events, stating that it was difficult to relate it to others that have not done it. Storytelling is indeed a deeply human and necessary characteristic of making meaning in the world, especially in reference to critical events or crises of meaning. In telling their stories, these individuals are no longer living the event in "passivity," but are actively reworking the experience and their relationship to it, asserting a kind of creative authority over the past event, their lifeworld, and of their self (Jackson 2002:15).

The power that storytelling has for making meaning has direct implications for ayahuasca's viability as a method of treatment for healing. Steffen Vibeke in his analysis of the healing narratives in the communal therapeutic environment of Alcoholics Anonymous programs provides insights into how personal narratives are acted out in a continuum between autobiography and broader communal myth, in which "individual and collective experience are merged into the same therapeutic process" (1997:99). Likewise, through the ayahuasca ceremony individual illnesses are connected to broader spiritual narratives. On the individual level, narratives of healing operate as templates to be utilized to assert agency over one's self. Cynthia Dickel Dunn's study of a Tokyo speech class invokes Foucault's "technologies of the self" and the "reflexive self" to analyze how personal narratives are utilized as a means of self-transformation within such environments, illustrating the aspect of agency in storytelling (2014:133). In the environment of the ayahuasca ceremony, the individual seeking transformation approaches the space with specific intentions, guided by the New Age discourse orienting the self towards deep healing, transformation, and self-knowledge. These 'technologies of the self' continue to provide the road map after the ceremony. Narratives thus shape experience and social agents in turn shape and create their own stories as they integrate experience.

The Calling

This process is illustrated most clearly by individuals that drastically alter their life trajectory post ceremony. Joseph described a degree of clarity that came with his experience, explaining how some large life decisions such as moving to a different country with a significant other had suddenly become obvious: "well, of course that's the right decision you should do that, you only get one life." Many of the people that changed their life trajectory towards working with the

plant medicine, the foreign volunteers and practitioners, expressed similar moments of clarity that led to the decision to do so. Debbie, who owned her own lodge expressed an extended learning process that provided context and meaning to significant events that occurred in her life:

> "Yea and that was something that actually gave me what they call a nervous breakdown, I felt the spirit was sitting on my chest and choking the life out of me sort of and that was also a being that came to me every night and talked to me…Like I was 14 that time and it lasted until I was about 17 maybe, that time of spirits and energies and sounds and I didn't really, gosh you don't understand, I was living in Western culture and no one was explaining it to me, if I had been in a Native culture they probably would have sent me to some teacher to learn about those sort of things"

Debbie had experienced what she described as a calling from spirits that eventually led her to Peru to begin her own practice. The "calling" to change one's life trajectory is sited as a major aspect of the shamanic tradition in the literature and is likewise a common trait among foreigners that choose to become healers (Lewis 2008:120). Fredrick described how after his first experience with ayahuasca and returning home, he decidedly refused to seek employment or any professional job, because "the plants told me this is what I need to do," which eventually led to him working at a popular retreat. I find that this calling to the practice as described by my informants is often embedded in much grander narratives of changing the world for the better through spreading the practice of the medicine. Many times, from participants to volunteers to owners, Western culture is critiqued as being deficient or failing in some way and the message of plant healing is an element that can heal not just the individual but the broader culture with a "shift" in the "collective consciousness." Debbie depicted our dire situation:

> "I'm not saying it's all bad but it's just like, it gets to the point where they want everybody on pills and want them to keep taking pills and then that actually has so many side effects so, that's why I'm talking pretty broadly because there's this whole shift in consciousness that we need to make if we want to make the world survive, if we want to survive on this earth."

Brabec de Mori describes Northerners spurred to become healers after being introduced to ayahuasca as "finding themselves," adopting a feeling that the increased understanding of

spiritual issues gained through the ayahuasca ceremony is important knowledge to be spread in the world that could potentially lead to a "more balanced understanding of the world and the universe" (2014:216). Thus, the "calling" becomes more of a mission, and "healing" becomes about more than the individual, extending the individual healing narrative to incorporate humanity collectively. Daniel likewise described how the practice he was engaging in was an important ancestral tradition that Western society has become separated from and actively repressed. Psychedelics such as ayahuasca can collectively heal human culture:

> "…we essentially kind of removed the word spirit from our vocabulary or from our perception of reality. And here we are the products of that removal. And it hasn't gone so good you know, it doesn't look so good for us now. And pretty much everybody feels a sense of emptiness that the spirit would reside in that emptiness if we had it as the core identity that it is still within Indigenous paradigms. And we have tried to replace it with consumerism."

Recall that Debbie expressed the notion that we should be able to commune with spirits, but Western culture has "shutdown" that aspect of our lives "so thoroughly." Considering this, Alex Gearin in his study of ayahuasca use in Australia challenges the strict notions between individualistically oriented healing practice of New Age Neo-shamanist practices. Rather, the ceremony brings with it "forms of ethical comportment among drinkers" operating with a logic that goes beyond generalized distinctions of individualism and collectivism (2016:215). The ceremony has a significant communal aspect, one that often extends notions of healing to the broader human community; it is the quest narrative extended far beyond a singular experience in a ceremony. Narratives such as this extend forward in time and outward in space, providing a roadmap of meaning to be embodied by conscious social actors among other social beings. The aforementioned narratives present in New Age discourse, such as the moral components of the responsible consumer assisting in salvaging a dying way of life that has the power to address the spiritual problems of Western culture, do not just prepare and modify the experience of the ceremony, but can also serve as a guide of integration after ceremony.

7. Conclusions

Ayahuasca tourism is exploding in popularity, with the largest city in the world not accessible by road occupying a nexus of globalized activity. Thousands travel to Iquitos, Peru yearly to drink the hallucinogenic brew in the Amazon Rainforest under the guidance of a shaman. Considering the popularity of psychedelics in Western culture and the increasing availability of ayahuasca in North America and Europe, the question as to why individuals invest in traveling to this remote city becomes critical and implies several things. First, individuals traveling to obtain ayahuasca are looking for more than merely consuming a psychoactive substance, that is, the appeal of the ayahuasca experience extends far beyond the physical act of drinking the brew and the hallucinations it stimulates. The typical tourist tends to seek an extended spiritual journey, or pilgrimage as identified by Evenga Fotiou (2010), a process that is essential to desired outcomes of spiritual transformation, healing, and growth. More broadly there are implications for what defines "experience" as a whole, beyond sensory input and cognitive processes within a single individual conscious human. This study contributes to the discourse on phenomenology by applying an anthropological framework to elaborate the ayahuasca journey of the individual foreign tourist. I achieved this through occupying a popular tourist neighborhood in the city of Iquitos, Peru for one month, collecting ethnographic data, conducting long form semi-structured interviews, and having a multitude of conversations.

I have argued that the result of the ayahuasca journey in its entirety, from socialization to its norms and discourses, to partaking in its ceremonial consumption, to working towards integration of its experiences, is all contingent upon a variety of social and environmental factors. Additionally, outcomes of the journey are renegotiable over time and space. I conclude that if anything can be said to characterize the ayahuasca experience or experiences, it is this contingent nature. As such, I have aimed to characterize the ayahuasca experience, and by extension all human experience, as largely social in nature. The ayahuasca journey begins with socialization to a variety of narratives, including Indigenous spirituality and healing, New Age discourse, and scientific materialism, all of which blend and overlap, acting as powerful templates which pattern individual expectations. This orients the tourist towards deep introspection, personal healing, transformation, and even the existence of spirits. Indeed, the migrant imaginary is capable of utilizing sometimes seemingly contradictory ontologies to

inform and order their world view. The resulting phenomenological modification on the ultimate outcome of the ceremony and of the journey as a whole is fundamental and profound.

I have demonstrated that the answer to the question "what characterizes the ayahuasca experience" is far more complicated and ambiguous than a mere typology can adequately summarize. The centrality of the ceremony illustrates the psychedelic experience as ultimately a collaborative social process, patterned by discursive norms. The ritual is a performance that incorporates multiple actors in the embodied ceremonial space, which serves to guide the focus of the participant. Emphasizing my social phenomenological framework, I conclude that absent this ritual context the ayahuasca experience is *fundamentally* different. In the context of the ceremony, for example, the visceral reaction of vomiting is framed as a purging of negative energies or traumas, acting as an integral aspect of the healing process. The ceremony itself is certainly cited as a primary appeal of the journey to Peru for the tourist. Common elements between informants include the difficulty in describing the overwhelming experience and the challenging or arduous nature of the ceremony as an integral aspect of the process of transformation. In describing their experiences, informants utilize a wide variety of cultural tools to depict events and states of being, often with a partial though temporally oriented narrative structure. I have asserted that the discourse and cultural imagery around ayahuasca not only serves to provide tools for imposing meaning and communication, but also shapes the experience of ayahuasca visions themselves. Importantly, as asserted by Michael Jackson (2002, 2015, 2017) narration also provides a tool for the migrant imaginary to exercise agency through storytelling, giving them the ability to assert control over the chaos of the psychedelic experience, and impose order on their own lives.

In the context of the interview, the informants' narration of the ayahuasca journey and their experiences include all the ambiguities, complexities, uncertainties, and contradictions common to any lived experience. The ayahuasca journey is not a one-time experience that is forgotten after the event, much to the contrary. For many, it has long-term repercussions in which the individual continually returns to with attempts at integration, made through changes in life patterns and storytelling among other social beings. It is not uncommon for participants to experience a significant crisis of meaning after their ayahuasca ceremony, or to feel a "calling" to pursue new avenues of self-actualization and of being in the world (Lewis 2008).

There are many anthropological studies that have examined the utilitarian nature of narratives and their direct implications in terms of efficacy for healing and development (Vibeke 1997, Dunn 2014). The case is likewise being made by recent anthropological and psychological research that cultural and personal processes of meaning making are central components to the efficacy of treatment (Talin & Sanabria 2017, Moerman 2012). Anthropologist Shana Harris specifically examines this in the context of psychedelic healing rituals with Ibogaine, emphasizing the role of narratives in ordering the "unspeakable" (2019:116). Future studies could continue to develop this trajectory by comparatively analyzing ayahuasca (or other psychedelic) experiences in a variety of contexts to further expand upon the question of what characterizes these chaotic and profound experiences. Again, I ask one to imagine drinking the bitter brown liquid in the Amazon under the authority of a shaman chanting their icaros, in comparison to taking the same psychoactive compound in the form of a pill in a doctors office under the guidance of a psychologist. Additionally, considering the temporal relations between the experience of an event with recollections and processes of storytelling and integration, future studies could serve to elaborate these concepts through long term engagement with participants, tracking their relationship to the ceremony over a course of many years. Likewise, we must continue to critically engage with the concept of "experience," the controversies and debates of which Jason Throop (2003) outlines. Psychological studies attempting to establish typologies of psychoactive experiences, such as those provided by Benny Shanon, can also provide a fruitful source for critical engagement (2002, 2010).

Anthropology is uniquely situated to provide critical cultural and environment context for what constitutes experience, as well as analyze the tools and processes through which individuals navigate and give meaning to experience. Anthropology can tackle the difficulty of studying the psychedelic experience by staying open to the complexity, ambiguity, and most importantly the socially and environmentally contingent nature of experience itself. Informants possess a degree of ambivalence, contradictions, and re-assessments regarding their own ayahuasca stories. The "ayahuasca experience" is thus defined by its contingent nature, its stunning, beautiful, and profound complexity, and also its confounding ambiguity. People and cultures address and mediate this ambiguity with storytelling and structured ritual, pulling from narrative templates

and creating them, which serve not only to impose meaning but provide tools for individuals to assert their agency and control their life experience as a social consciousness among other social beings.

The social elements of the ceremony then, everything around ayahuasca's consumption, has significant meaning to the way ayahuasca is experienced. The broader narratives of the calling, of collective healing, Indigenous spirituality, New Age discourse, are all examples of powerful mythologies that allow one to navigate and make sense of their transformative and sometimes arduous experiences. Narratives act both as boundaries to experience and as stages for creative social expression. The narratives that the individual uses to organize the chaos of their life "should not be assumed to denote mutually exclusive states of mind, let alone different personalities, ethnicities, or ontologies" but represent a plurality of devices that the migrant imaginary has the ability to pull from (Jackson 2015:293). To tell the story of the ayahuasca experience is to "no longer to live those events in passivity, but to actively rework them, both in dialogue with others and within one's own imagination…while storytelling makes sociality possible, it is equally vital to the illusory, self-protective, self-justifying activity of individual minds…we tell our stories to live" (Jackson 2002:15).

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