

Among *Ayahuasqueros*

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Information flows through the multiple continuum of being, seeking equilibrium yet paradoxically carrying images of ways its flow toward entropy is locally reversed by a being or society or phenomenon. These images become concepts and discoveries. We are immersed in a holographic ocean of places and ideas. This ocean of images and the intricacy of their connections is infinite; we understand it to whatever depth we are able. This is perhaps why great genius proceeds by apparent leaps. The revolutionary idea that inspires the genius comes upon one complete and entire by itself from the ocean of speculative mind. We seek the intuitive leap that reveals the very mechanism of that other dimension. The need for such a leap for humanity will grow as we exhaust complexity in all realms save the microphysical and the psychological. At present my method is immersion in the images and self-examination of the phenomena — that is, taking psilocybin mushrooms and pondering just what this may all mean, with confidence that time will at least deepen understanding if not answer all questions.

My provisional acceptance of this view of the dimension “seen” in hallucinogenic trance approximates the worldwide “primitive” view that we are somehow comingled with a “spirit world.” Is the access to another dimension that the psilocybin mushroom makes available something so uniquely peculiar to it that it is reasonable to associate the phenomenon specifically with a single species of mushroom? Or is this strange world a thing unique to the chemical psilocybin, wherever it occurs in nature? Albert Hofmann has written in *LSD: My Problem Child* that when he presented tablets of psilocybin to the mushroom shaman of Huautla, María Sabina, the old *curandera* avowed, “The spirit of the mushroom is in the little pill.”

In my confrontations with the personified Other that is resident in the mushroom, part of its message was its species-specific uniqueness and its desire for a symbiotic relationship with humans. At other times it presented itself not so much as a personage but as a giant network that many sorts of beings in different parts of the universe were using for their own purposes. I felt like a

two-year-old child who struggles with the question, “Are there little people in the radio?” Perhaps the psilocybin-revealed dimension is a kind of network of information and images, or something even more substantial.

To answer such questions it seemed to me that it would be necessary to explore another plant hallucinogen, taxonomically unrelated to the psilocybin-containing fungi, yet chemically related to psilocybin at the level of molecular structure. The drug that I had in mind and that perfectly fits these criteria is *yagé*, or ayahuasca. This is a brew whose chief component is a huge jungle liana or vine, a woody creeper that attains to gigantic size in the Amazon Basin of the New World. The brews of the *Banisteriopsis* lianas have been known to science longer than have the mushroom cults of Mexico, but they are no less mysterious for that, even in today’s overexplored world.

In 1851 the British botanist and explorer Richard Spruce, comrade of Alfred Russel Wallace, penetrated the upper Rio Negro Basin, heartland of Amazonas. He found the Tukanoan Indians of the Rio Vaupés using a strange drug to cause trances and prophetic divination. The drug was called *caapi*, and colorful and terrifying hallucinations were said to characterize its effects. Spruce made careful collections and later wrote, “I saw, not without surprise, that it belonged to the order *Malpighiaceae* and the genus *Banisteria*, of which I made it out to be an undescribed species and therefore called it *Banisteria caapi*.”

Fantastic accounts have characterised the *Banisteriopsis* drug since its discovery. The first description of the mysterious drug’s effects was reported in 1858 when the explorer Villavincencio took it among the tribes of the upper Rio Napo in Amazonian Ecuador. This area is frequently implicated in reports of admixture plants, which are other plants added to the basic *Banisteriopsis* brew to strengthen the hallucinations. Chemists who early attempted to isolate the alkaloids in *B. caapi* gave their compound the romantic name “telepathine,” reflecting the deep forest reputation of *yagé* as a genuinely telepathic drug. This is an idea most recently given impetus by F. Bruce Lamb in his *Wizard of the Upper Amazon*, in which Lamb’s informant details collective trance sessions where all participants shared the same vision. So *yagé* is not without a gnosis of its own. It has a reputation as a curing panacea and a powerful hallucinogen, bringing visions of strange cities, jungle beasts and shamanic voyages to the heart of the Milky Way.

The great ethnobotanist Richard Evans Schultes inspired my decision to seek ayahuasca and to compare its experiential dimension to that of psilocybin when he wrote, “We stand merely on the threshold of our investigations into the botany, ethnology, history, pharmacology, chemistry and therapeutics of that complex of intoxicants known as ayahuasca, *caapi* or *yagé*.”

Our expedition to Peru would consist of just three persons: myself, Kat, who was our photographer, linguist and botanical artist, and Richard, an old friend and a medical historian with a special interest in folk medicine and shamanistic curing. Neither Kat nor Richard had been into equatorial jungle before, but we prepared as carefully as possible and eagerly awaited the day when we would be whisked south to what we hoped would be warm jungles and high adventure. Reality at last outran apprehension — on the morning of March 6th, 1976, we

arrived in Lima. As we flew south from Los Angeles that night, Comet West was impressively visible from 29,000 feet up. I took it as a good omen for our trip. Our arrival was typically rough — we were forced to linger several days in order to get our shotgun properly registered, a necessary ordeal since going unarmed into the forest only invites difficulties.

In a matter of days after arriving in Iquitos we found ourselves at the mouth of the Rio Napo, Loreto, Peru. Events moved very quickly. We unexpectedly encountered Lord Dark, nicknamed for his piercing stare. An old acquaintance of mine from Colombia, he was now a river pilot with his own boat. We accepted his offer of passage up the Napo. We, he and his female companion, and three young Germans travelled for three days before we came to the mouth of the Napo, with hopes of reaching Atun Cocha, a Yaqua village on an oxbow lake, later that day.

Our situation was an abyss of ambiguity. The strangeness of simply being in the Amazon in combination with the “chance” encounter with Lord Dark had made for a literary denseness of possibilities. I accepted the situation because hourly we moved farther up the Napo, deeper into ayahuasca country and nearer to our own goals for the voyage; but I hoped we would be able to pleasantly part from this odd boatman, the same who accompanied me and my other companions nearly to La Chorrera on that distant previous trip into the jungle. Finally we parted company with our unkempt Charon. Fortunately we managed to part on strained good terms, so involved was he in a financial squabble with his German passengers.

The boat returned down the Napo, leaving us for the first time alone and without immediate onward transportation. We were at a small village some six hours downriver from Masan called Fancho Playa. There we dried our clothes and recovered from the ordeal of five days of cramped boat travel. The villagers had shown us a house with a sound roof and an attached cooking area, and there we were quite comfortable as we adapted and familiarized ourselves with the environs. I was disappointed in the degree of acculturation among the people living along the river. Though it is not a route of trade, traditional lifestyles have either faded or moved deeper into the jungle.

The Amazon is full of reverses and surprises. Our stay in Fancho Playa was difficult. We were plagued by mosquitos, chiggers and biting black flies. Days of abuse by these pests brought us to long, fevered nights passed as in a waking dream. In spite of the difficulties, which were trials indeed and were to force us to new plans, we did learn that *brujos* with the ability to kill and cure and with knowledge of ayahuasca are common in that area. So well known are they that our informant was a child of six whom we met while walking in the forest with one of the men of the village, searching out *cumala* trees. *Cumala* is a generic term that includes the *Virola* species and related genera. We were too uncertain of how things stood to ask after ayahuasca.

Our difficulties with insects and dysentery forced us to reassess our first venture into the Rio Napo. There were many things we needed but did not have. Even though we had located a veritable nest of self-alleged *ayahuasqueros*, we could not do any work unless we equipped ourselves against the insects that

accompanied the unseasonal persistence of the rains. Accordingly, we made plans to leave Fancho Playa shortly before dawn the next day on a *launcha* bound for Iquitos. On the eve of our departure we learned of an old woman in the village who had a knowledge of ayahuasca. In addition, the people with whom we shared some *aquardiente*, the local distilled alcohol, turned out to be village characters with a reputation for using ayahuasca. We were assured by the people that every settlement on these rivers has its own *ayahuasquero*.

After a rainy return to Iquitos and a number of days of wearing out our illness, we came to our lowest point. Our money was flowing away and we had few hints as to where to contact anyone knowledgeable about ayahuasca. Finally, after several futile attempts, we were able to find someone who could point out to us the home of Manuel Córdova-Rios, whose story is told in *Wizard of the Upper Amazon*. He was 91 but looked 60, except for cataract-clouded eyes. He vehemently insisted that the *ayahuasqueros* of Iquitos are largely charlatans. Córdova-Rios was quick to point out that it is not necessarily the deep forest Indian who is master of the ayahuasca knowledge — that it is simply a matter of finding someone who knows how to prepare it. He urged us to look into the Pucallpa area and gave us the name of a woman who had learned her art from him many years ago, Juana Gonzáles Orbi, a leper whose affliction was arrested using jungle remedies, but not before she lost much of her hands and feet. Sr. Rios assured us that she loved to prepare ayahuasca for people and had helped *gringos* in the past. Since all other trails had grown cold, our meeting with Sr. Rios gave our quest a new direction. We decided to fly to Pucallpa, hoping to find this woman and to be found acceptable by her as observers.

We anticipated that a shift several hundred miles southward would shed some optimism on our somewhat illness-wearied and expense-riddled search. It was difficult amid the strain and bustle of travel to keep in mind the strangeness of the object of our search and the vision that would certainly be a part of our experience if we succeeded. Our meeting with Córdova-Rios had seemed decisive, since he was the person who had described the telepathic collective trances that are a part of what we hoped to validate.

We arrived in Pucallpa shortly after dark. Our first impression was of a typical frontier town, more rough and ready than Iquitos, too raw and jumbled to have much charm. It is a sprawl of brick, mortar and corrugated metal roof. But for its size it could be any of many river hamlets in the Amazon. No oil companies were yet active out of Pucallpa, so the clash of money and tradition was less noticeable than in Iquitos. The streets were unpaved, and we awoke the next morning to a cold rain (out of season, we were assured) that had turned the town to a sea of red mud. Our first round of inquiries was completely fruitless — whatever Juana Gonzáles' situation was, it was not overly publicized. It seemed that so far our trip had been a series of wrong moves and wasted efforts. Even in Pucallpa we had no certitude that we would find what we were looking for. Yet we had decided to continue until all our money was spent if we could generate no other conclusion. We continued to hope to find an *ayahuasquero* and learn whatever we could of the craft.

After two days of fruitless searching, our morale had drifted even lower. It

had remained impossible to locate Juana Gonzáles, but in our search for her we inquired about other *ayahuasqueros* who might know of her. We were lead to the Bar Huallaga, a country store at kilometer 12 on the highway to Lima, where we met Don Fidel Mosombite, a quiet but intense man whose home and *chacra*, a field of slash-and-burn cleared for growing food, were located nearby. As we climbed off the bus in the midday sun we were swept into the scene in progress on the dirt porch of the store. An older man was drunk and stood raving; first he greeted us, then sang the praises of our man, his *amigo*, a *maestro*, who sat silently nearby. “We are one blood. Today *la gente — un sangre. El maestro* brought me to my life. In Chiclayo, my home, ayahuasca brought no visions, but with this man...” And so on, very hard for me to follow.

The man we had come to see said nothing, but occasionally nodded agreement. His air of calm intelligence and disdain for the drinking going on was singular. He seemed near 40, powerfully built, his eyes so dark they appeared all pupil. My overall impression was of intelligence and self-control, nothing theatrical, nothing studied. The drunk older man told of ayahuasca journeys that Sr. Mosombite had made with Argentine doctors and other foreigners. The difference of the brews throughout Peru was mentioned, and I asked about the necessity of *chacrana* as part of the brew to produce visions. Sr. Mosombite confirmed this. *Chacrana* is the local term for a *Psychotria* species, *Psychotria viridis*, whose DMT potentiates intense hallucination in combination with harmine and other β -carbolines.

Talk led to more talk, and gradually the impression grew that here was someone whose *ambiente* seemed correct for the mystery that he claimed to understand. I mused that this person, living peripherally to teeming Pucallpa and seeming an intellectual and respected professional to his peers, fit the typical profile of a shaman. We departed the small roadside bar and went alone with the *ayahuasquero* to the nearby house of the herb-dealing old woman at whose stall in a Pucallpa market we were first advised to seek Sr. Mosombite. As we walked, he openly discussed the plants we passed. “Specialties of the old woman, who grows them all near her house.” Directly adjoining the house was a shed of bare-board construction, a place, we were told, where ayahuasca was taken every Saturday night. The room was not different from that of a small jungle church or school — it was in fact both. We talked at length with the old woman of the house and with the *ayahuasquero*. We spent the night and slept in an auditory environment of farm sounds, sounds of the nearby jungle and the occasional passing of trucks on the highway. At the invitation of Sr. Mosombite we decided to return to take his ayahuasca with the group. The stress on visions led me to hope that we were closing distance with the experiences we sought in coming to Peru. The feeling then, since we had recently had so many disappointments, was one of expectation tinged with the nervousness that attends any challenging hallucinogen. If all went well we would stay with this new circle of people and gather as much plant material and information as we could. That became our firm intention.

Finally the night came when at the house of the herb woman and in the company of Don Fidel and another shaman, his nephew, we had our first ayahuasca

experience. We arrived in the late afternoon and relaxed and made small talk until 8 o'clock, when it was thoroughly dark. Then the shaman smoked a tobacco pipe of unusual construction, blowing smoke into a brown glass quart bottle that contained the ayahuasca and whistling through his teeth. The bottle was passed around and we were assured that we would be sick in half an hour. Beyond slight discomfort, none of us had any stomach difficulties. We were all praised for having bodies so clean that we could hold the ayahuasca. Don Fidel and the old man that had been with him at our first meeting both vomited, the older man near the half hour mark and Don Fidel many hours later. At thirty minutes I felt myself slipping into a lulling numbness. My senses were alert and I felt at ease and comfortable in the strange and unfamiliar surroundings. The singing began about ten minutes later, interwoven walls of sound by which the singer led and developed the hallucinations. As we were transported by the singing, sometimes Quechua, sometimes Spanish, sometimes monotonal chanting, hours passed.

My mood shifted from one of apprehension of a reputedly powerful psychedelic drug unknown to me to disappointment that the dose was apparently insufficient to trigger the anticipated flood of visions. At a pause in the singing we discussed our roughly similar states of mind with the *maestros*. We discussed the difficulties of a first "flight," differences of diet, or chemical poisons that might be interfering with *la purga*. Don Fidel questioned us about our drug use. Did we know marijuana? We described our devotion to cannabis and mushrooms and drew praise for our habit of taking only plant drugs. We again drank the ayahuasca. It was suggested that perhaps marijuana would help us concentrate on the ayahuasca even as the tobacco helped them to do so.

We had previously been too uncertain of ourselves to smoke, but in a moment I hauled out our Oaxacan pollen and sent it around. Don Fidel abstained; his nephew Don José held his toke down and, eyes running tears, proclaimed it truly *fuerte*. We put the candle out and again the song-induced walls of nearly visible sound enwrapped us. Hours after the beginning of the trip, my mind, relaxed by the familiar taste of cannabis, flowed out into a hallucination-filled space. The synergistic effect of smoking cannabis is apparently necessary for deep rushes of visionary images on lower doses of ayahuasca, as it is with other hallucinogens. The singing showed the way through the billowing hypnagogia. I roved and scanned like a swimming fish caught in a spiral dance in a sea of tryptamine images, the mundane and the unimaginable crowding for my attention.

One moment among many of that first ayahuasca night is amusing to relate. In the nearly absolute darkness of our meeting place the singing was occasionally punctuated by popping mouth noises, strange expulsions of air. At one point I heard a low puff of air and immediately felt a sharp tingling on my right hand. I looked down and had the visual and tactile sensation of a blue tingling circle of light on my hand. I reached for the center of the sensation, expecting a sliver or quill. The thought of curare came and went in my mind, triggering a mild alarm easy to talk myself out of; but the sensation remained and grew: a spinning disc of blue foil hanging incandescent in the dark, growing larger, then gradually fading. It was a vision, of course, but it is not impossible that the sensation

was caused by something like a *tsentsak*, a psychophysical power carrier moved by the will, and perhaps by the breath, of the shaman.

Don Fidel and his nephew are shamans who understand the vegetable psychedelics as a means to explore and understand the mechanics of the mind. Don Fidel especially seemed without elitism or any wish to obscure what he knew. They both unhesitatingly answered our every question. “Where are the old wild ayahuasca plants in virgin forest?” “At kilometer 29 and 32,” was their open reply. What about admixture plants besides *chacrana*? Don José recognized my description of *Diplopterys cabrerana*. He did not call it *oco-yagé* but knew it as *puca huasca*, and said he would try to get some. He was concerned that our hallucinations were not clear and definite. “We must concentrate on Jesus Christ,” he said. “Concentrate on the fecund white stone filled with light.” He knew a woman in Yarina Cocha who had *puca huasca*, a plant we would later explore in order to learn to cure.

The songs continued for many hours, songs declaiming the shaman’s perceptions that we, like them, were sound and healthy, good persons for ayahuasca. There were songs for absent persons with problems; a song for a young woman present to have the dark effects of some dubious but unspecified act expunged; songs of marijuana, another curing plant to explore; songs of oration, invocation and prayer. There were even songs asking the Lord to move the hearts of patients to pay their bills; these latter on the part of Don José, the nephew.

We paid 300 *soles* or six dollars for the songs of the *medicos* and for the ayahuasca itself. In Yarina Cocha, raw ayahuasca is 250 *soles* per kilo and *chacrana* is 150 *soles* per kilo. We were happy to divert our money from the overpriced accommodations of Pucallpa into the rural people’s hands. They understood our sincerity and limitations. There was a sense of shared approach and of different kinds of understanding mutually reinforcing each other. “The understanding that comes from understanding,” was a phrase that I heard in my mind many times that first ayahuasca night. It is a description of the gnosis that plant psychedelics bring; a standing within things yet somehow beyond them, an eidetic reduction that transcends subject and object. The ayahuasca way of understanding was opened before us. Though that night we only lightly brushed the power of ayahuasca, after I was able to relax I felt that, given sufficient opportunities, we would eventually be able to make our way deeply into the mystery.

The next day we would make collections of other medicinal plants, and on Saturday, two days later, we would photograph every stage in the preparation of a new batch of ayahuasca and again voyage with it that night. Eventually a number of possibilities would loom. We hoped to make a pilgrimage to an old wild grandfather plant in the forest. An attempt would be made to collect and try various admixture plants. The shaman claimed to be familiar with the use of the mushroom, although he preferred ayahuasca. Is the use of the psilocybin mushroom in the Pucallpa region a traditional folkway? Is it something learned recently from travelers familiar with the Mexican Indian use of the mushrooms? How long has the mushroom been taken in Peru? Is it possible it antedates the introduction of *Stropharia* in the New World? Is it possible that its use

is pre-Conquest? If the latter, then it is the first time such an ancient folk use of psilocybin mushrooms has been suspected in South America or anywhere outside of Mexico. These are fascinating questions, and the possibility exists of finding some concrete answers. Many experiences and much work lay ahead, but having found the path of ayahuasca and having been judged fit to follow it, we were filled with high anticipation of the things to be learned and seen in the weeks ahead. Our job was to refine our powers of observation so that we would make as much of the opportunity as possible.

Pucallpa is far more a jungle outpost than is Iquitos. Iquitos had a large mestizo population, while Pucallpa is a city built by the indigenous people as their population center. Such conditions explain the flourishing of jungle folkways in a modern rural and urban situation. Ayahuasca curing is deeply embedded in and respected by the mestizo culture. It flourishes among and is pursued experientially and intelligently by those who know and preserve the ancient New World ayahuasca cult.

It may be that the South American *yagé*/ayahuasca complex is the largest psychedelic cult in the world. From Panama to Bolivia, from the Pacific coast to deep into Brazil, these visions are regularly sought out, individual practitioners making their reputations on the quality of their brews, chants and cures. Like all shamanic practices, the ayahuasca cult is the creation of highly individual personalities. For this reason, simple laboratory analysis of drug samples will not dispel the air of real mystery surrounding ayahuasca.

Ayahuasca is as good as the person who makes it is meticulous and demanding. The culture of rural Peru faces a shattered past and a turbulent future. The fate of the ayahuasca mystery hangs tremulously in the balance while at the collective level the culture gropes toward a decision to repress or reinforce the institution of hallucinogenic shamanism.

To truly understand ayahuasca would take years, for there are as many forms of ayahuasca as there are *Banisteriopsis* varieties plus admixtures. Local variations in ingredients and procedure should be systematically studied. It is an important task, reserved for one who wishes to give order to a particularly disordered set of ethnopharmacological issues. My own interest is the vision state and the contact dimension per se. I want to investigate these compounds as a means to those ends. For that, the tryptamine hallucinogens remain the most effective and impressive investigative tools that I am aware of. With them one can find oneself in the mandalic center of energies that lie present at hand but are normally unseen, pure image and imagination unconstrained by any limitations. The hallucinations are not limited to visions of a type or color or tone. It is as open a modality as, literally, it is possible to imagine.

The quality that permeated associating with the shaman Don Fidel was, at its best, a sense of mutual collegueship. He was reverent in the face of the *lux natura* that his mystery revealed, but his understanding was that the operational basis of the experience was biochemical, subject to manipulation and open to theory making and shared consensual validation. The *ayahuasqueros* are true technicians of psychedelic sacrality. Their approach — awed self-experiment and accumulation of a corpus of techniques experienced as valid — is no different

from our own. Any approach that excludes these qualities will be too removed from the subject matter to offer a useful description. This is why anthropologists often miss the point. We should admit that we know no more of the topology of the collective unconscious than any other culture. No one is more knowledgeable in these things than a sincere person of any background can choose to become. It is shamanic personalities, grand exploring souls, who somehow rise above or find themselves beyond any but a universal set of values; they explore the deep waters of our collective being. They show the way, and to be with them is to be near the cutting edge. Shamanism in Peru is like European alchemy in that it utilizes psychic involvement in matter, but European alchemy became entrapped in a fascination with metals and purified elements. Psychedelic shamanism more happily centers its attention on living matter, specifically plants, where alkaloids and other biodynamic constituents congenial to the primate nervous system are encountered. Ayahuasca is such a plant, and its alchemy, jungle alchemy, is an immense panacea to those who use it regularly.

Hoping to observe the cooking of a batch of ayahuasca, we arranged to meet with Don Fidel early one morning at his home. Though we arrived an hour late, for unclear reasons he expressed amazement that we had made our way to his home so early. “Anyway,” he told us, “it has not been possible to get *chacrana*, so there can be no cooking.” He was not abrupt, and apparently that evening’s ayahuasca session would still be held with previously prepared brew, which is supposedly good for six months — an ayahuasca vine being kept alive by being buried in wet sand. Don Fidel showed us a sprout-covered sandy stick that his child brought from nearby. We asked about *puca huasca*, which we assumed to be *Diplopterys cabrerana*, and were unsettled when Don Fidel dismissed it as “food for dogs.” When questioned he would say only that it was “too bizarre” and “not fit for Christians.” When we had mentioned it to Don José he only said that he knew a woman in Yarina who could get it. Could this woman have been the mysterious Juana Gonzáles Orbi? When questioned, Don José agreed in essence with Don Fidel that *puca huasca* (*D. cabrerana*) is too strong to use for curing. He also called it *comida del perro* (food for dogs), but it was less clear whether this was an expression of contempt or an actual description of some folk belief about the plants.

My attitude toward what we were and still are trying to find out is like that of a detective. We must simply work our way through each lead, each possibility, separating the wheat from the chaff. Does this rural ayahuasca-curing scene reflect the presence of practitioners who truly understand, control and voyage into the borderland world that classical shamanism insists exists and whose parameters we are trying to define? A possible and unexpected conclusion that I can imagine now emerging from our trip to Peru is that while we can discover and even to some degree penetrate rural systems of psychedelic healing, we shall find it very hard to find people who look beyond the curing power to ask what is its basis and what is the meaning of hallucinogen-induced visions generally. The ayahuasca takers observe other worlds in space and time in their visions, but they feel a different sort of involvement in understanding what this may mean or in testing to validate what they believe. At the edge of things, where the really

intense DMT-caused visions occur, it is hard for the shaman's personality not to be dissolved in a more primitive reaction of fear and unthinking awe. The curing shaman will not seek experiences in such titanic landscapes, and the researching shamanic explorer must step lightly, testing epistemological equipment at every step. Such a one is hard to find, since such a person will proceed by some theory of activity, and theories, especially concerning such arcane matters, do not travel well from one language to another.

I am left to conclude that we must remain our own guides into those still-elusive dimensions, more unexplored than we had previously imagined. This is what I have done for years, since each effort to find a preexisting tradition that made complete sense of the shamanic dimension as I personally know it has been less than successful. It may be that possession of pure chemicals in combination with collected living plants and the collected available data of ethnography put one in a better position to gain an overall sense of the importance of psychedelic visions than can be gotten from any particular informant, limited necessarily by adaptation to a single approach. What I really wish to know is whether we are alone at the edge of these mysteries, or whether there is a tradition of the hyperdimensions of gnosis. If the latter, what happens to one who gains admittance to its mysteries?

A hot and muggy equatorial afternoon found us awaiting with anticipation our second opportunity to take ayahuasca. We had moved to the home of the old woman where our first session took place. With our dwindling funds we were only too happy to accept living space and escape the tremendously inflated hotel prices in Pucallpa. The hospitality of the people was limitless, but the heat and the biting insects, about which we could do nothing, remained to wear us down.

The regular Saturday night ayahuasca session was cancelled because our friends were unable to obtain *chacrana*, the *Psychotria* admixture. This disappointed many people, some who had come from Lima by bus. Conversation in the wake of that disappointment brought out the opinion that *chacrana* grew and could be obtained at kilometer 29 — the same area where Don José indicated that the very old uncultivated *Banisteriopsis caapi* vines grow. We determined to make a trip there.

We spent a day in search of the admixture plant. We took a bus to kilometer 34 and arranged to purchase a substantial amount the following Sunday. Then, hoping to find a small supply to tide us over until then, we walked six kilometers off the main road on the road to Nueva Requena to the home of Don Fidel's uncle Don Juan. Don Juan occupies the elder uncle position in relation to Don Fidel, even as Don Fidel occupies the same position relative to Don José. At Don Juan's we were shown and allowed to photograph several small *chacrana* plants. They had been grown from cuttings and did not appear to be doing well. Perhaps these plants were in too dry a location, for according to the two dons, *chacrana* grows best in wet, swampy lowland. They were slow-growing and were short. Don Juan also posed proudly with a meter-long piece of ayahuasca, almost as tall as he was. It had been gathered in primary forest some distance from his home; the old, wild-growing plants are preferred.

After we left Don Juan's and had stopped for a beer at the Bar Huallaga, Don

Fidel held forth on many subjects: the sin of inducing abortions, the relations of some *curanderos* to God and of some to the devil. Don Fidel emphasized a kind of Manichean view of good and evil in which the world is a mixture of things, some of which belong to God and some to the devil. Man has two bodies, one visible and associated with the physical and one invisible and associated with mind and thought. This second body is not destroyed by death, and it is the part of the shaman that cures and sees. Strange how close to the worldview of the *Corpus Hermeticum* his ideas are.

One morning, having slept well, we set off for Yarina, hoping to observe Don José making ayahuasca. We found him settled back with a couple of lady patients. Possibly they were smoking marijuana when we arrived, as there was some scrambling upon which Don José's monkey gazed restlessly. Ayahuasca was simmering in a shed not far away.

Don José gave us some *chacrana* leaves that he had managed to get to give to Don Fidel, and thus it was that we saw mature *chacrana* foliage at last. Its rubiaceous nature was clear, and the berries were about 3/16ths of an inch in diameter and waxy green, just as Schultes had described. We obtained voucher specimens. Don José pointed out a taxonomic feature that he considered unique to *chacrana*: a double line of budlets or meristematic nodes that stud the underside of each mature leaf. Perhaps this has not been noticed before.

Events were punctuated by discussion whenever we spent time with Don Fidel. This particular day he was full of cosmology and metaphor. We further discussed *puca huasca*, and I learned that not all visions are human visions; some that are meaningless to human beings are visions meant for animals. *Puca huasca* carried the vision best understood by dogs. Though he may have been pulling our leg a bit with this, the traditional avoidance of *Diplopterys cabrerana* is curious. Meanwhile, the *chacrana* market is booming — a kilo packet costs 250 soles. Apparently *chacrana* grows well only in wet lowland, and those lucky enough to have a source sell it at a dear price to less fortunate *ayahuasqueros*.

It was on that same excursion to Yarina that we ran to ground the search for Juana Gonzáles Orbi. We inquired after her in a part of Yarina that we were told on a previous visit was her home, but the trail was cold. The good woman had been away for four months and was not expected soon. We spoke with her middle-aged brother and learned that she now practices out of Tingo María and travels between there and Lima. It appeared that Juana Gonzáles Orbi was not to be encountered on this visit.

On April 7th we had another try at Don José's ayahuasca. Again, while there was a buildup of psychedelic potential, there was no outbreak of deep visions. Several people complained of the weak brew. This session ended any further dealings with Don José, for he was apparently not really able to prepare ayahuasca, even though he had the traditional recipes and materials. He represents the vitiated tradition. Financial success, or more properly the search for it, has caused him to forget the basics. Ayahuasca is in large measure dependent for its strength on the even and smooth rhythm of preparation. Don José is slapdash, and hence his *purga* is *el poco purga*, as Don Fidel said. It is Don Fidel's expectation that when the ayahuasca is made properly there is no

difficulty in getting off. We were eager to try Don Juan's brew. We had tried just a sip on our visit to his house, and it certainly tasted stronger than any other we had been offered.

During this time we were definitely moving closer to Don Fidel and his uncle and away from the *sobrino* (nephew), Don José, who was younger, eager, and, as Don Fidel said, "ambitious." Don José eventually went off to Lima on a reputation-building errand and so faded as naturally as did Juana Gonzáles. Thus we were left with the older, poorer, more rural of the *ayahuasqueros* we had met. Both Don Fidel and Don Juan gave us a feeling of solidity and trustworthiness. We had really yet to get to know Don Juan, who on our first visit to his home showed us harvested ayahuasca and young *chacruna* bushes. With Don Fidel we had long, groping talks. He sees his immediate surroundings as transformed. He lives in "an earthly paradise," and the muddy trail winding past his thatched home is "the path that Christ walked on earth." He says he leads a clean life and can cure — it is his gift. His real interest is the invisible body that persists after death and that is the mental vehicle of those who travel on ayahuasca. This is an idea that I relate to the modern notion of UFOs.

A day was spent with Don Fidel at his house watching and photographing how he prepares his ayahuasca. The *chacruna* is placed at the bottom of a two gallon enameled metal pot and is covered by pieces of ayahuasca that have been crushed by being beaten with a hardwood club against a log. The crushed stems, some nearly two inches in diameter, are arranged in layers until the pot is filled; then the material is covered with water and boiled, none too gently, until the volume of water appears to be cut in half. The plant material is then removed and the remaining liquid, perhaps one and a half quarts, is poured into a smaller pot to cool while the larger, now empty, enameled pot is refilled with a load of *chacruna*, ayahuasca and water, exactly as before. This second load is boiled down just as the first was. The two liquid fractions are combined in the enameled pot, and the boiling down continues until about one liter of café au lait-colored liquid is obtained. Sometimes the ayahuasca is further refined to a paste. Don Fidel's brew is twice as dark as the rather weak beverage prepared by Don José.

There came a day in April that began with the realization that Kat and I were ill with salmonella. Our hope was to hold our guts sufficiently together to be able to do justice to the ayahuasca that we had seen prepared the day before at Don Fidel's house. Since the brew was twice as dark as the other ayahuasca brews we had seen, I hoped that it would be twice as strong. We arranged to have two liters of ayahuasca prepared for us, it being our hope that analysis of this and of our sample of each brew we encountered would give us an idea, once back in the United States, of their nearness to the ethnopharmacological ideal. In spite of our two ambiguous experiences, I was hopeful that we would find a compelling psychedelic dimension in the experience of ayahuasca.

While Don Fidel was brewing, a man stopped by for some medical consultation. When the subject changed to ayahuasca the visitor avowed that he had taken it and had "seen nothing." Since it is regarded as a health restorative as well as a hallucinogen, seeing visions seems to be the icing on the cake for

many who occasionally take ayahuasca — while for us hallucinations are a *sine qua non*. The factors that had previously impeded our getting off were perhaps minor: the dose may have been insufficient or we may have been resisting the effects, unconsciously unwilling to allow ourselves the psychic vulnerability that would accompany getting wildly intoxicated with a room full of unfamiliar people. I leaned to the idea that the dose was insufficient, and later events proved that true.

We took ayahuasca five times with the shamans of Pucallpa, the third time using ayahuasca made by Don Fidel and doled out by him. This time both Kat and Richard got psychedelically stoned. By their testimony, the brew worked. I, on the other hand, spent a very hot, sticky night meditating on the threshold of an intense psychedelic experience. Because of the rigid control of the dose by the shamans, it is nearly impossible for a person of large stature to get an effective dose. There is nothing to be done in such a situation, but it was ironic to unwillingly become a mere spectator to the drug experience in which I had hoped to participate and for which I had come so far.

On the day following that evening we went with Don Fidel to kilometer 29 to collect ayahuasca, with hopes of getting voucher specimens of the plants comprising the brew. We found the ayahuasca. It was a grand specimen — several vines twisted into a cable nearly eight inches in diameter — but it was tragically damaged. A ten foot section had been removed between where the plant left the ground and the highest point that a standing person could reach with a machete. Nearly all of the hundreds of pounds of ayahuasca above the cut were so dried out as to be deemed useless. Nonetheless, we managed to fill a burlap bag with this low-quality material. We had found the ancient *Banisteriopsis*, only to find it vandalized.

Because of the size and growth conditions of the *Banisteriopsis* plant, it is very difficult to introduce it into new areas or indeed even to preserve it in areas where it is now indigenous. Because so much biomass is necessary for the ayahuasca brew, *Banisteriopsis* species are particularly susceptible to being overharvested and often therefore are in short supply. These huge old vines are certainly growing rarer and rarer around population centers, and those who use them must inevitably seek farther and farther afield, which presages a day when their scarcity will seriously threaten the ayahuasca cults.

Many of the early and uncertain reports of ayahuasca's effectiveness have been due, I believe, to the higher body weight of explorers relative to the body weights of their hosts. Of the brews we took, only Don Fidel's had been truly effective. All of the inferior ayahuasca that we saw was an opaque liquid looking like well-milked coffee that did not settle or clear, while Don Fidel's brew was a rich coffee color that after a day or so settled out and became a clear, dark tea- or amber-colored liquid. How did these other brews manage to appear so different, since Don Fidel's method of preparation appears as direct and simple as one could imagine? I suspect that since ayahuasca is sold by the bottle, these other practitioners are very lax. They fail to boil off excess water to obtain a really effective concentration. The proper preparation of ayahuasca may well be a dying art.

What we see is a tradition growing vitiated and sterile before our eyes. People here brew and take ayahuasca regularly, but rarely is it prepared with sufficient care and at sufficient concentrations to allow one to enter trance on the dose apportioned out at a curing meeting, so the usual story is one of exaggerated claims and minimum effectiveness. All these difficulties are only compounded for a person with an above-average body weight. As a consequence, outsiders have given, and continue to give, very different descriptions of the effects.

Mysteries abounded at even the most mundane level. Don Juan arrived late one afternoon, expecting to share with us the bottle of ayahuasca we had paid him to prepare and that had served as an untapped reserve bottle at our last session with Don Fidel's brew. No one had seen that bottle since that evening, everyone assuming that Don Fidel had transported it to his house. Such was not the case, so grave suspicion came to rest on the *sobrino*, Don José. He had slouched into the session late, sung badly and loudly and against everyone else's song, and left in the early morning hours without a word to anyone. Don Juan was certain that the *sobrino* had stolen the missing bottle. He rushed to Don Fidel's and confronted him, saying that Don Fidel's practice was in disarray and that taking on the *sobrino* had been a mistake. It may have been that Don Fidel, for reasons unclear, was very reluctant to expel his nephew from the ayahuasca sessions. The fate of the missing bottle was obscure enough, though we could not even be sure that the outrage would rid us of the presence of the *sobrino*.

Don Juan finished his description of his visit to Don Fidel's and then promised that Friday, Good Friday, we would do a bottle that he would prepare. Naturally, we agreed; we always availed ourselves of every opportunity to take the brew. Kat was eager to advance into it, and I, while holding no great hopes for any particular occasion, still hoped to experience the full effects of ayahuasca before we departed.

At Don Fidel's house we prepared two kilos of the concentrated ayahuasca honey to take with us to the States for use there. This cooking project occupied the better part of three days. Don Fidel prepared four enormous pots, each boiled three hours and drained, then recombined and reduced to two liters. At its conclusion we had a material of which, we were later to learn, two tablespoons was sufficient for visions. My own point of view had improved during this cooking, since I found respite from a wracking bout of salmonella that left me weakened but still game.

In that rather calmer moment between bouts of illness and ayahuasca taking, I assessed what we had accomplished. We had been accepted into a particular ayahuasca-taking circle and had enough exposure to the brew to know that effectiveness depends entirely on the care used in making it and on the knowledge and personality of the shaman-chemist. The person we met who brewed best was the person to whom we were closest. He seemed to hold nothing back in matters of locating and identifying plants or in making the brew. For him the heart of *la ciencia* lay in the mystery of the songs and the cures, and of these things we were very ignorant; but we were free to return and to learn as

much as we wished to absorb. Don Fidel knows well the correct way to prepare ayahuasca, and this in itself is a great secret today. He doubtless knows much more than he would share over time.

Even at that time, without having yet felt the full effects of ayahuasca, there were nevertheless things I noticed that seemed to set it apart from other hallucinogens. As it comes on it is mildly anesthetic, so that the rush is not accompanied by restlessness or any sense of energy moving up the spine. Rather, the visions appear without any particular somatic effect accompanying them. Generally, except for the vomiting it sometimes triggers, ayahuasca seems very smooth, with a very pleasant comedown that leaves one invigorated instead of exhausted. In the initial rush it is like DMT; later it exhibits the long, coherent visions that make its reputation unique. The experience of curing, the vast landscapes and the communication at a distance are effects that have made ayahuasca legendary.

Don Fidel had said to us in essence that we should use well the many ayahuasca trips he was making available to us to take home. If, after thirty or more trips, we had been carried to a place where we wished to learn more, then we should return here. He was wise to urge us to explore ayahuasca against the background of our own culture and expectations. For all the interest that the shamanic performances we had witnessed had held for us, they had necessitated that we behave as spectators; yet real understanding of ayahuasca doubtlessly comes from entering into it as a participant. This can only be done by repeated and careful observation, once in a familiar environment and free to experiment with dosage, setting and other parameters.

Don Fidel finished cooking the large batch of ayahuasca that we had contracted for and we made reservations to return to California, thus setting an end to our period of field exploration into the phenomenon of ayahuasca. Once in California we would be able to examine the effects of the brew away from the setting that is its natural home and in the setting that is our home. Purists might object, but recurring bouts of salmonella and various water fevers endemic to jungle Peru had nearly broken our hold on health. These things cannot be avoided when one lives as the people live; and of course, we had no resistance acquired through long exposure to these diseases. The situation in Amazonian Peru is as funky as I found rural Nepal in 1969, the previous record holder in these matters. Don Fidel seemed in agreement with our decision to depart. He knew we would be better able to gauge the personal importance of ayahuasca once we had taken fifteen or twenty flights inside the normal flow and structure of our lives.

There were many around less sympathetic to *gringos* than Don Fidel. He had really risen to a universal humanism in his dealings with people. He invited us to return and allowed himself to boast of strange, strong brews he knows how to prepare. What few details could be gotten about these imply no known drugs and so are especially tantalizing. "Next time," said Don Fidel, "when you are familiar with ayahuasca and have your tape recorder."

We had hoped to duplicate the ayahuasca brew in California from *Banisteriopsis* plants that we had under cultivation there; but if, as the *ayahuasqueros*

maintain, the plants must be at least five years old to produce the desired effect, then we were naive to take this approach. Perhaps these plants as cultivars in temperate zone greenhouses will remain merely scientific curiosities and cannot ever become the source of a substantial amount of ayahuasca. Probably only a synthetic duplication of ayahuasca compounded with the correct percentages of DMT and β -carbolines will ever make the experience available outside the area where it is endemic.

Hallucinogens reveal to the human psyche holographic images from all parts of our continuum. Though humanity as a whole may not yet be able to integrate these images by undergoing evolutionary waves of advancement, our role as investigators is to immerse ourselves in this revelation of atemporal images. We need to make deep voyages through clear mind space to contemplate the source of these mysteries. This is what was elusive during our trip in Peru — the turbulence of physical travel made the crystalline mental dimensions we sought all the more distant. In Peru we lived the life, saw the plants, met the people and shared all the joys and discomforts — but this, however it may seem, was not fieldwork. True fieldwork for us meant being psychedelically ecstatic and at play in the fields of the Lord in search of the shamanic dimension where contact with the Other is likely.

Once back and among familiar things, we could more clearly make comparisons and distinctions. Hallucinogens are a finite set of compounds, and by acquiring experience of the effects of the various chemically possible hallucinogens it is possible to zero in on those compounds most reactive with one's own highly individualistic set of physical drug receptors. Thus we can slowly learn the chemical route to just that set of effects most personally useful and beautiful. Obviously this cannot be taught, but must be learned through persistence in attempting to define the self in the hallucinogenic dimension. Probably no two routes are the same — and different people have different methods, though they may use the same plant or substance. Finally, it is the person and his or her unique place in nature and time that determines the depth of the vision vouchsafed. Many have sought to understand the way in which persons and families evolve special drug receptors and thus special relationships to certain botanical drugs. Choosing an ally means finding a physiologically neutral way of repeatedly triggering the ecstatic mind state in which contact with the alien modality is possible.

We anticipated something special at the gathering on the night of Holy Saturday. Both Don Fidel and Don Juan would be bringing bottles, and the *sobrino* would not be present. There would be enough ayahuasca for everyone to have a proper dose. It was to be our last opportunity to take ayahuasca in its native setting. The experience nearly ten days in the past had given way to a calm awaiting of whatever this last experience would be. I had given up anticipating the content of these experiences. I was interested, almost as an outsider, in whether before we departed Pucallpa we would meet the visions.

Our fourth ayahuasca trip made many things appear more clear, and a few things less so. Both Kat and I managed to get off, though she less than the previous time. My deepest immersion in hallucination occurred that night,

a full-field hallucination of a kind of flowing magenta liquid. It seemed very promising but then slowly faded away as quickly as it had appeared. A few minutes later I walked outside to get some fresh air, and to my surprise I became suddenly sick. I thought that this would surely be followed by an intense wave of hallucinations, but nothing as strong as the first magenta wave was repeated. I was pleasantly, somatically stoned. I affirmed to Don Fidel that it was good, and he seemed gratified. There is no doubt that one can take flight with Don Fidel's brew if one is free to increase the dosage until the connection is achieved.

That night I glimpsed a set of issues not explainable by the social context in which the brew is taken, adumbrations of the idea that there is a vast difference between naturally occurring, one-plant, full-spectrum hallucinogens and prepared hallucinogens, even if the latter are compounded of local plant materials. The unprepared, naturally occurring drug is a mystery, stabilized in the genetic component of the plant itself. The composition of the active compound remains virtually the same over thousands of years — untroubled and uncompromised by the migrations, epidemics and vicissitudes that occasionally disrupt the society of its practitioners.

The case of a difficult-to-prepare combination drug is quite different. For the tradition to remain intact, the correct understanding must be preserved and handed on. In such a case the plants themselves lose some of their mystery, and that mystery is transferred to the persons who prepare and control the power of the drug. Thus the way is open for a cult of personality to intrude itself between the hallucinogen and the practitioner. The efficacy of a preparation may last only as long as the lifetime of the practitioner, and the mystery becomes a hollow sham if the drug is not correctly made.

The night's imagery was drifting and incoherent, comparable to the effects of a small amount of mescaline. Ayahuasca seemed a hallucinogen with less of the internally self-organized quality that characterizes mushroom psilocybin, which seems to show that the psilocybin experience is not so much self-exploration as an encounter with an organized Other. I don't know whether this is a distinction most people in my situation would make or whether my long and intense involvement with the mushrooms has allowed me, almost without realizing, to develop an empathy so deep that it has become for me another personality — not a chemical substance at all. Though this question hinges on a number of subjective factors, it is an important one to answer. It has implications for another question: whether we are pursuing a phenomenon uniquely personal and therefore forever private, or whether there is a special mental experience encountered at great depth in the psychedelic experience that is qualitatively different and truly hyperdimensional.

The encounter with the Other seems to occur in fairly deep water. Shamans, at least the ayahuasca shamans, are quick to call such autonomous power complexes evil or demonic. Their approach to ayahuasca is usually to dose themselves so as to only slightly exceed the hallucinogenic threshold. The more disorienting and profound forms of intoxication are kept out of the ceremonies we have seen, probably because these are social events and some sort of collective ambience must be maintained; and certainly these states are strange — they

are not mere phantasms drifting before closed eyes, but complete immersions in higher topological manifolds and experiences potentially incomprehensible or frightening. Individuals may take power to themselves by boldly, even recklessly, exploring these dimensions, but even though these places are the heart and soul of shamanism, they are too numinous and energy-laden to be accessible through a tradition. Instead they must be personally discovered in the depths of the psychedelically intoxicated soul. It almost requires a modern mentality — or great courage alone — to probe this area unflinchingly, for it is the demon-haunted bedrock of being.

Our trip to Peru and our experiences with ayahuasca convince me that even with our modern methods of scientific analysis it is going to take courage to understand what these plants show. We have reached the point where we must accept all responsibility for the direction we follow and then go alone without the comforting delusion that what we are trying to define is not unique and unprecedented. These are the realms of chaos into which one can go only as deeply as one's understanding shows the way. We each have different capacities to understand and different forces driving us toward or away from these mysteries; finally, when one finds the edge of what one knows and even the edge of what anyone knows, then perhaps one has reached the point where the real contact begins.

Immense novelty is not something guarded by a shamanic guild that understands what it guards. Rather, all groups that claim certain knowledge of anything are shams. Science and religion are such shams. Novelty is unguarded because its domain is everywhere. It presses in on the seeker often most obtrusively when he is furthest from the secrets that tight-fisted lineages hover over. The power of the Other is humbling and magnificent, but because it cannot be bent into power in this world, priestcraft turns away from it. It is the “thrown away knowledge” of the Luiseño Indians of Baja, California. It is only seeing and knowing. It informs the blessed and abides with them. It is the Logos, the faint outlines of humanity's evolving Overmind casting the enormous shock wave of its shadow out over the chaotic centuries that immediately precede its rising out of the long cosmic night of human hopes to end profane history.

Under the effects of ayahuasca I often found myself reflecting on the phenomenology of the hallucinatory state in general. While the literature speaks of the effects of hallucinogenic drugs as lasting for hours, in my experience it is actually only the peripheral effects that endure so long. The period of intense visual activity behind closed eyelids lasts more nearly forty minutes to an hour, almost as though the episode of hallucination corresponded to the temporary perturbation of some brain subsystem by the presence of the psychoactive compound. As soon as the brain is able to enzymatically respond to damp the drug-induced perturbation, the episode of hallucination ends, though other somatic effects may persist for some time. Hallucinations are in part neural phenomena accompanying an internal fluctuation of the brain state of an organism. This internal fluctuation is of an extraordinary sort, since it is of a quantum mechanically delicate enough order to be partially influenced by will and cognition.

A few days before we left Peru and at Don Fidel's wife Rosabina's urging, we asked Don Fidel about the possibility of taking ayahuasca once more. He seemed completely amenable to the notion, so we scheduled the event for the next evening. We would use the same bottle that had been drawn from at the last session. This would be our fifth ayahuasca voyage in three weeks — an unusually intensive exposure for most hallucinogens, but ayahuasca, aside from causing vomiting, seems to have no adverse side effects. In fact, each day following a session I felt clarified and revitalized. Such is not the case with the frequent use of other hallucinogens. Ayahuasca seems benign in the body, but perhaps at higher doses this would be less true. Psilocybin is also benign upon early exposure, but done at the frequency we had been doing ayahuasca even it would be followed by aching muscles and enervation on the following day.

Our fifth trip occurred in the same situation as the others: semi-public and in the shed directly adjoining Sra. Angulo's house. Nothing radically different could be expected — all the constraints of the earlier sessions were in force. On that last ayahuasca voyage an event occurred that has returned to my mind again and again. We were joined that last night for the second time by a man who was an aficionado of ayahuasca. He had spent some time on the Rio Negro and in Brazil, always pursuing the better brew. He sang a song — which he described as *de los brasileiros* — that was almost a miracle. Through the rhyme and rhythm each word seemed to have a galaxy of relationships to all the words around it. Long warbling runs alternated with pleasing whimsical stops and glides. Some Indian languages sound as close to the tryptamine glossolalia as anything I have encountered. It was high art — a rupture of the mundane plane.

These ayahuasca experiences seemed to have resolved themselves into a series of perspective-widening disillusion. During my last voyage with Don Fidel I was not sick and became approximately as intoxicated as on the previous two trips. The dose stuck with me all night long, but again the period of even mild hallucination could not have lasted more than fifteen minutes. After we returned to Berkeley we would find that a larger dosage level of ayahuasca delivered the experience we had expected from ayahuasca in its jungle habitat. The shamanic curing context is perhaps not the ideal context for determining the parameters of any hallucinogen.

On the brink of return to California, we said our last goodbyes to the people in the ayahuasca circle. As we were leaving, Don Juan showed up with the bottle intended for that night's regular session, and we were able to get a sample for analysis from his controversial brew. On our last visit to Don Fidel he also gave us a bit more of the *esencia*, the syrup that finally precipitates to the bottom of a well-made bottle of ayahuasca. We had learned much and gathered much hallucinogenic material.

Cities pass like billboards in the night of the mind, one night Lima, the next night home. I could not but think as we crossed over the Andes of the little circle of people back at Sra. Angulo's house whistling and chanting. How strange to have shared their mystery with them and to be returning to our own frenzied society that knows nothing of ayahuasca. How strange a creature is man; with religion, intoxication, dream and poetry we try to take the measure

of the shifting levels of self and world. It is a grand enterprise, hedged about with tautology but no less grand for that. I hoped that the sense of the special worth of all plant hallucinogens that this trip reinforced so unexpectedly would not be lost once we had returned to a world whose familiarity should not be taken for the merely mundane.

It had been barely seven weeks since Comet West glowed outside the window of our airliner flying south toward Lima, hardly a month since Lord Dark left us at Fancho Playa on the Rio Napo. Worlds seemed to have come and gone, yet friends who stayed behind in the United States hardly realized that any time at all had passed, emphasizing the bewildering sense of a density of experience that the traveler is always able to make his own. We were not unlike the psychedelic voyager who may be absent from company only a single evening and yet may fill that evening with years-long odysseys in strange and enchanted worlds, may in fact explore strange times and worlds of alternate possibilities in a single long silence.

Once we returned to the States, our ayahuasca would serve as the basis for experiments that shed light on its possible ability to synergize psilocybin. We worked through those experiments with a sense of their place in the context of hallucinogens generally. We needed to reflect on the strangeness of the possibilities that the magical plants had made familiar to us. We must chart further directions of research that hew to deep waters yet minimize risk.

People in the Amazon insist on the importance of chanting as a vehicle of expression when on tryptamine hallucinogens. This is a vital point, since in some way sound can control the topology of the hallucinations. We need to shed our inhibitions and experiment with sound and tone in the presence of these compounds. I have long felt this but have been uncertain as to how to proceed; the style of chanting of the *ayahuasqueros* is a beginning.

As I had anticipated during the visit to Peru, I was able to find my way into the confidence of the ayahuasca mystery once I was free to experiment with dosage and setting. Twice since returning from the Peruvian Amazon, Kat and I have taken Don Fidel's brew. Neither of these trips was as intense for Kat as her most intense experience in the Amazon. I, on the other hand, got much deeper into it than I had ever done before.

The first of these experiments was elusive and unsatisfying. We each took 50 mL of ayahuasca, which looked to us like the approximate dose that we had been given in Peru. I experienced a brief surge of hallucinations, but of a very banal sort, rather like being lost in a vast supermarket. We concluded from this experience that we had somehow become inundated by the telepathic background noise of the hillside suburban community in which we lived. It made us reluctant to repeat the experiment, since a psychedelic brush with the subliminal vulgarity of our own culture was somehow much more disturbing than had been regular sessions with people who had a whole different language and worldview than our own.

During that first trip, the subject of the flow of images was shifting and seemed impersonal and removed from me. Thinking of the impersonal aspect of these images encountered in myself, I formed the aphorism, "Sailing the ocean

of the self; every wave cut by my prow is myself.” There was a tendency to be drawn into emotional involvement with the scenes at once removed from myself. Twice I reminded myself that feeling frustration at the direction in which the images were flowing was inappropriate, and that I should be open to what is shown me no matter how different it may be from my expectations. Kat was as usual more affected than I. She had audible hallucinations — a strange voice speaking a futuristic kind of musical English. Toward the end of her visions she saw people in poverty-stricken and sleazy conditions. This may have been the DMT in action, since subthreshold DMT experiences often do dissolve into squalid or banal images as the experience fades away.

A few weeks later, and in the company of a friend who, like ourselves, had considerable experience with psychedelic agents, we decided to try again. This time we each took 60 mL initially and then about an hour later 20 mL more. At last I completely broke through. It was a dimension very similar to the state invoked by the mushroom psilocybin, leading me to harden my opinion that active compounds in *Stropharia cubensis* must metabolize to some near relative of dimethyltryptamine before the effect can take hold. At one point I was given a kind of motto, which came unbidden: “Mind conjures miracles out of time.” It was like a Zen *koan* holding perhaps a clue to the nature of reality. There were long bursts of science fiction-related images and beautiful hallucinations against a black background, a seeming characteristic of the ayahuasca visions. The message from this trip, which came as a very deeply felt gestalt perception, was that the Other is in man. I felt this more clearly than ever before. Unlike the psilocybin rapture, which presents itself as an alien intelligence, the ayahuasca seemed to have a kind of psychiatric presence that urged the recognition that all images and powers of the Other spring from our confrontation with ourselves. Like the psilocybin mushrooms, it displayed a network of information that seemed to make accessible the experiences and images of many worlds, but ayahuasca insisted that in some sense still unrevealed these were ultimately human worlds.