



An Account of Healing Depression Using *Ayahuasca* Plant Teacher Medicine in a Santo Daime Ritual

by Jean-Francois Sobiecki

Abstract

Ayahuasca is a psychoactive traditional plant medicine preparation used by the indigenous tribes of the Upper Amazon in their shamanic traditions. Its use has become popular amongst Westerners seeking alternative means of healing, and the medicine has now spread across the globe via syncretic spiritual healing traditions such as the Santo Daime Church. Despite the increased use of the medicine, little research exists on its effectiveness for healing depression. The existing literature does not contain a detailed self-reported phenomenological account of ayahuasca healing a case of depression. The aim of this paper is to share a personal account of healing depression using ayahuasca in a Santo Daime ritual in Johannesburg, South Africa. This experience was unplanned and unexpected and resulted in a profoundly transformative healing process. Based on my experience, I describe ayahuasca's ingestion as having created a powerful mind-body-spirit connection that resulted in what appeared and felt like a profound reconfiguration of the bio-electrical energy system in my body and a powerful anti-depressant action on my mind. These effects were catalyzed by a strong intention to heal and trust in and take responsibility for myself. Other South African Santo Daime members have reported healing of depression with ayahuasca, although in longer and different processes. It appears that the medicine engages the individual's unique collective self (life-history, physical and mental disposition, beliefs and intents) resulting in different outcomes for different individuals. Thus, from my own and others' experience, I describe ayahuasca as a spiritual medicine; one that promotes enhanced awareness and deeper connection to one's core self, to others and the greater universe, while facilitating the manifestation of one's intentions and beliefs. This encounter with ayahuasca provided me a first-hand experience of learning and healing from the medicine, making real to me the indigenous Amazonian description of plants as being teachers and doctors.

Ayahuasca is a psychoactive plant medicine preparation used among the indigenous groups of the Upper Amazon. The word *ayahuasca* (also known as *caapi* or *yage*) is a Quechua term meaning 'vine of the souls' and is applied both to the beverage itself and to one of the source plants used in its preparation, the malpighiaceae jungle liana, *Banisteriopsis caapi* (Schultes, 1957). The preparation is made by boiling or soaking the bark and stems of *B. caapi* together with various other plants. The mixture employed most

commonly is the Rubiaceae genus *Psychotria*, particularly *Psychotria viridis* (Schultes, 1957).

The medicine is primarily used for cleansing, divination and curing illness and disease as part of indigenous shamanic practices (Luna, 1984). Shamanism involves practitioners who, by using 'techniques of ecstasy' (entering trance and enhanced states of awareness), through various means (depending on the tradition in question) such as song,

dance and psychoactive plants, interact with the world of spirits in order to acquire knowledge and power to help or heal their communities (Eliade, 1987). *Ayahuasca* and other psychoactive plants in the Upper Amazon are believed to have spirits that 'teach' the shaman how to heal (diagnosing illness, what plants to use and how, restoring the spirit to a patient, and teaching magic songs called *icaros*). These plants are referred to as "plant teachers" by the shamans (Luna 1984, p. 142). Plant teachers can also be used to obtain power, which shamans can use to harm instead of heal and thus act as sorcerers. This is a fairly common practice in Amazonian shamanism (Fotiou, 2010).

It has also been noted that tryptamine alkaloids have anthelmintic properties (Levin & York, 1977) and it is hypothesized that medicines such as *ayahuasca* containing such alkaloids are used by the indigenous Amazonians as anthelmintic agents (Rodriguez, Cavin, & West, 1982). *Ayahuasca* is therefore a good example of a holistic medicine that works on the physical, psychological and spiritual levels of the individual. Mckenna (2004, p. 115) explained the pharmacology of the brew:

One of the components, the bark of *B. caapi*, contains β -carboline alkaloids, which are potent monoamine oxidase-A (MAOA) inhibitors; the other component, the leaves of *P. viridis* or related species, contains the potent short-acting hallucinogenic agent N,N-dimethyltryptamine (DMT). DMT is not orally active when ingested by itself, but can be rendered orally active when ingested in the presence of a peripheral MAO inhibitor, such as the β -carbolines.

The psychoactive actions and effects reported from ingesting the plant preparation include sedation, euphoria, enhanced awareness, visions, purging, emesis and ataxia.

Santo Daime

The Santo Daime is a syncretic spiritual healing movement originating in Brazil "that melds popular Catholicism and nineteenth-century European Spiritualism with Native Amazonian and Afro-Brazilian traditions" (Madera, 2009, p. 85). The doctrine was founded in the late 1920s by a rubber tapper named Raimundo Irineu Serra, or Master Irineu as he came to be called, after experiencing a series of visions in the forest with his use of *ayahuasca*. In these visions he was instructed by the Queen of the Forest, who revealed herself to be the Virgin of the Conception, to begin a new spiritual healing tradition called Santo Daime. The purpose of this tradition was to replant the Doctrine of Jesus

Christ on Earth. She revealed in the vision that *ayahuasca* was Santo Daime, literally translated as 'Saint Give Me', meaning "Give me strength, give me love, give me light", (Madera, 2009, p. 85) that was the living Christ incarnate. "Serra was one of thousands of displaced and dispossessed, exploited rubber-gatherers who sought to eke out a living in the unknown and - to them - exceedingly dangerous frontier regions" (Wright, 2008, p. 182). The medicine was used by these "mostly poor, black, rural devotees as a communal means of accessing divine guidance, communing with the natural and supernatural world, and forging healing" (Madera, 2009, p. 86). As the church following grew, a number of hymns began to be received by church members in the form of "singing murmurs" (Brent, 2001, p. 2). These are considered to be gifted from higher worlds and are believed to invoke an eclectic pantheon of spiritual beings (Brent, 2001). The Santo Daime ceremonies involve singing these collections of hymns in sessions or what are called 'works.' This singing is accompanied by musical instruments. The *ayahuasca* is taken as a sacrament resembling that of the Christian Eucharist commencing with singing the hymns (Madera, 2009). The movement has spread globally in the last few decades with satellite church branches being found in major urban centres such as London, Johannesburg and Amsterdam.

Literature on Ayahuasca and Depression

A review of university databases shows that there is a paucity of academic literature on the use of *ayahuasca* in the treatment and healing of depression. This is particularly the case in relation to literature written from a phenomenological (insider's) perspective. Some studies have indicated that the use of *ayahuasca* in the Santo Daime context results in various benefits to social and psychological well-being (Mckenna, 2004) and some studies have begun to clinically test Santo Daime members on psychometric measures of conditions like anxiety (Santos, Landeira-Fernandez, Strassman, Motta, & Cruz, 2007). These studies have yielded promising yet inconclusive results.

The literature review resulted in the identification of one dissertation study concerning *ayahuasca* and depression. In this study, the researcher interviewed six American subjects suffering from chronic and/or treatment-resistant depression concerning their state of depression and their lived experiences before and after taking *ayahuasca*. The study made use of a phenomenological approach (Palladino, 2009). All six participants reported that symptoms that had not been improved by other previous therapies had been alleviated within a period of 10 days following their consumption of *ayahuasca*. Four out of the six participants had not had any previous experience with

ayahuasca. Despite the small sample size, this study provides preliminary evidence for the successful treatment of treatment-resistant depression with *ayahuasca*. However, long-term follow up is thus needed to confirm these results. The study concluded that *ayahuasca* has “the potential to take participants into deep aspects of experience, offering access to unconscious material, which is not otherwise easily available. In so doing, participants reported increased insight into factors/conditions that seemed to have formed depressive experiences” (Palladino, 2009, p. 88). In support of these findings, an urban Brazilian six month study demonstrated that Santo Daime subjects had a significant reduction in minor psychiatric symptoms, improvement of mental health, and a positive change in attitude towards more confidence and optimism (Barbosa, Cazorla, Giglio, S. & Strassman, 2009).

Substantiating these human studies, a few animal studies have demonstrated positive findings concerning the antidepressant-like effects of harmine (an *ayahuasca* constituent) (Fortunato et al., 2009; Lima et al., 2006; Osório et al., 2011).

In a study referred to as the ‘*Hoasca*’ project, findings suggested that *ayahuasca* also affects serotonergic function (Callaway, Airaksinen, McKenna, Brito, & Grob, 1994), providing preliminary evidence that *ayahuasca* could have antidepressant actions. The possibility of dangerous interactions between *ayahuasca* and other pharmaceutical drugs, most notably SSRIs (selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors) has been highlighted (Callaway et al., 1999). This should be a serious consideration for those who are on antidepressant drugs and who are contemplating using *ayahuasca*.

However, despite these studies, the literature does not contain a self-reported phenomenological account of *ayahuasca* healing a case of depression. Therefore, this paper aims to share a phenomenological account of a Westerner’s personal experience of healing depression with *ayahuasca*. There is a call for this type of experiential insight-based methodology in the field of ethnography (Schroll 2010). This type of research is valuable as it can indicate potential psycho-active actions and therapeutic efficacy of traditional medicines as well as further current understandings of healing consciousness. In this article, I offer insight as to how the medicine may heal depression and reasons why this healing may or may not occur with different individuals.

Research Methodology

The research methodology included: a review of the literature on *ayahuasca* and depression, discussions with Santo Daime members from South Africa on

their experiences or observations of *ayahuasca* healing depression, and a self-reported experience of healing depression using *ayahuasca* in a Santo Daime ritual in Johannesburg, South Africa. This experience was unplanned and unexpected, and was the first Santo Daime ritual I experienced. The experience could thus be described as having involved initiatory outsider participant observation. This circumstance was beneficial as I had no prior expectations as to what was to happen and was able to encounter the ritual for what it was. In this paper I share the process as it happened. I also provide insights concerning the potential healing dynamics involved in the use of *ayahuasca*. I tape recorded the details of my experience the day after my use of *ayahuasca* and used this recording to build notes for this paper.

Personal Background

For background purposes, I am an ethnobotanist with university training in botany and medical anthropology. I have had a life-long calling for exploring and knowing healing, including the use of medicinal plants, the knowledge of which I gained through self-study of nature, books, making and using my own herbal medicines, as well as participant observation with local healers throughout my life. I am currently apprenticing with a Northern Sotho healer in Johannesburg to learn more about southern African healing and traditional medicine.

Prior to the experience reported in this article I had six previous experiences with *ayahuasca* spanning twelve years and beginning in 1999. I could best describe these experiences as transcendental in nature. In these journeys, I engaged what I felt to be content from my subconscious mind, as well as spiritual phenomena and information that seemed more transpersonal. In retrospect, these experiences were major change catalysts that promoted connection and insight into deeper aspects of my core self and universal forces of energy. These experiences did not radically transform negative beliefs I had in my life at that stage although they initiated and promoted growth and learning in me.

The case of *ayahuasca* healing documented in this article is significant due to the spontaneous healing effect the ingestion of the plant medicine had on my state of depression at the time. I had experienced clinical depression before as an adolescent, and my friends and I recognized the symptoms in this case. I proceeded from feeling chronically anxious, fatigued, confused and despondent to feeling whole, content and vital for weeks and months following the medicine ceremony. This indicates the results of the therapeutic properties of *ayahuasca* for mood and energy related conditions.

The healing with *ayahuasca*

The date was the seventh of October 2011. I had decided to meet with Enio Staub, the Secretary of the Church of the Santo Daime, for discussing potential ethnobotanical research collaboration. I was in a state of depression, feeling hopeless, exhausted and in despair. To elaborate on the cause of this state, I will provide the context of my life-situation at the time.

I was in transition at the time, having just returned from a journey to India. I was temporarily staying at my parents' home, before finding a new home. I had returned fresh with new beginnings to old conditioning. My journey to India to learn and experience Ayurvedic medicine taught me the importance of impressions from the environment on health and wellness. However, I had made the choice before leaving India to return back to my old home with its old and predictable impressions. In retrospect, this was a great learning experience in its own right. After six weeks of being back at my old home, I watched myself reverting to habitual behaviours triggered by past scripts between myself and my parents. Furthermore, I was at a crossroads in my life. I knew I wanted to start a new life away from Johannesburg, my hometown but I was unsure as to what career direction and destination this would entail. I was keeping myself occupied with writing an ethnobotany related paper, though what started as productive work deteriorated and slowed to a trickle. I tried to find peace from the family home by going to the University of Johannesburg to work during the day, but this did not help me.

I also decided to self-medicate with the African psychoactive *ubulawu* plants I was researching at the time (see Sobiecki, 2008, 2012). These plants also assisted me in this difficult time. I experimented at my parents' home using one of four unidentified dried *ubulawu* plant species that I had bought from a traditional healer. I was hoping this *ubulawu* plant medicine would induce dreams for spiritual guidance, for which they are traditionally used, but this was not successful. I realized the importance of 'set and setting' in the psycho-spiritual healing process, because I noticed that my father was disturbed by my spiritual practices. This made me feel very uneasy to use the *ubulawu* medicines inside the house. In an extremely depressed and disturbed state I went to Klipriviersberg Nature Reserve to discard the medicines and return them to nature by placing them in a river in the reserve. While in the reserve I spontaneously sampled a piece of a dried root of another one of the plant species. This caused a great calmness in me and evoked memories that I needed to face. I subsequently used this unidentified plant for approximately two weeks with great effectiveness to help me sleep and relax. After the first evening of

using the plant, I woke with an image of a sun glowing behind my closed eyelids. This image, while peculiar, I experienced as comforting. It made me feel that I had a source of light within me despite how hopeless I felt. This experience reminded me how South American psychoactive plant medicines such as *ayahuasca* are considered 'plant teachers'. I hypothesized that the African psychoactive *ubulawu* plants could also be considered plant teachers. I am currently investigating this aspect in more detail. However, despite the benefits of using this African psychoactive plant, I still felt emotionally stuck.

Towards the seventh of October I was in a precarious psycho-spiritual place; my relationship with my father was tense, both of us feeling pressures and strains of different kinds and I was battling to decide on a course of action. On the seventh of October I met Enio from the Santo Daime Church at the house of one of the members. After speaking to him, his wife Maria and a colleague about the church, I felt a deep calling to open up and share my situation. I initially talked around the question of whether *ayahuasca* could be used for someone in a spiritual crisis, but I knew the question actually pertained to me. I was rationalizing; entertaining an intellectual rant in order to camouflage my heart's need for healing. Once I decided to be honest and share this information the pretence was over. Maria pointed out that *ayahuasca* would be a good medicine for me and that I needed to "look at my heart". Enio raised some very important points. He suggested that *ayahuasca* connects you to what you need at the time on a physical, mental or spiritual level and that the Santo Daime platform was a way that the plant medicine could introduce itself to Westerners. He also stated that, should I decided to take the medicine, I should trust myself and concern myself only about my own process and not with other people's processes. I learnt that it was an auspicious day; the anniversary of the founding member of the Santo Daime, Master Irineu. That evening there was to be a ceremony in celebration of the occasion. After some light snacks and chatting with Enio, I left to go back home to decide my course of action. Although I had doubts, I also felt a deep sense of trust in the situation, especially when I remembered Enio's words.

This would not be the first time I had taken *ayahuasca*, although it would be the first time I had taken it in a Santo Daime context. I had taken the medicine on a few occasions before over a period of years, once in South Africa and later in the Amazon. All of these previous experiences occurred in what can be called a hybrid shamanic ritual context incorporating self-exploration, shamanic healing methods, and facilitation by a shamanic trained practitioner. These experiences with the plant medicine were great catalysts of positive change and

growth for me, yet were difficult to integrate into my life and worldview at the time. They occurred over a short time, lasting no more than one week and, in retrospect, I believe that a longer and more continual process of using the medicines with a mentor would have resulted in a more integrative process of healing with longer-lasting results at the time.

Having decided to attend the ceremony, I began preparing myself and finding the recommended white and blue attire. Armed with trust in myself, I returned three hours later to the member's house that would serve as the facilitation space. As more people arrived, the owners of the house were busy organizing the space. In a dining room a long, heavy wooden table was brought in around which wooden chairs were placed. More chairs were placed around the circumference of the room. I helped where I could in organizing the space. About twenty people arrived. I was both nervous and confident. I tried to keep myself focused and centred. The feeling for me was one of a sense of shared purpose and communality, but being a first-timer and not knowing the community I did not have much confidence. However, this was to change after my experience as I made friends in the community.

I was shown to a seat on the circumference of the room, and everyone found their places. Enio and Marcia led the ceremony and they were seated at the front of the table. Some more experienced members held wooden rattles and paper hymn booklets. A number of the members were formally dressed in white suits and the setting had a reserved and respectful atmosphere. Enio carried the medicine in a five-litre plastic bottle. Its dark brownish-red colour evoked in me a deep remembrance; a joy and reverence of one of the most remarkable and unique tastes I had ever experienced. I can only describe it as the life-blood of the earth; distilled essence of earth, water and plant with a biting, sweet-sour wine type of taste. My taste buds recognized something magical about this decoction. It was thick in constituency and with a strong rich taste. When it was my turn, I walked up to the front of the table and took the tall shooter-type glass, prayed and spoke into the medicine to heal and guide me, then drank it and returned to my seat. I tried to prepare myself by having a blanket around my shoulders and was nervous with anticipation. After everyone had drunk the medicine, Enio made a short prayer for blessings, expressed gratitude and then the gathering began to sing the hymns. Although I rarely paid attention to singing these hymns on the occasions I tried, I noted they were about Mary, nature, plants and their relationships. I knew I had to go within myself so I did not concern myself much with other processes around me. I was ready to experience the effects of the plant medicine, but it took approximately another

thirty minutes for changes to occur. Ironically, no sooner had I let go of my expectations, than I found myself in the field of enhanced awareness.

My first noticeable engagement with the medicine was a feeling of wanting to connect my hands to the space and, as I slowly did so, I felt a heart-opening sensation that brought tears to my eyes because I was afraid of being vulnerable, of expressing what I needed to express. When I had raised my hands I felt energetic spiritual hands connecting with my hands. After more time I experienced a vision and a sense of two brown hands wanting to put my arms down and so I reverted to putting my hands down. I have often felt a strong connection to doing healing work with my hands.

The first powerful inner impressions I experienced were images of what appeared to be angelic horses ascending around a central column of energy, in harmony with the music. The visions I experience with *ayahuasca* are often not clear or three-dimensional forms, but have a nebulous energy appearance. They are what I would describe as spirit forms. On a few occasions during the ceremony I felt the archetypal struggle between light and dark energies (I believe the latter to be fears, personal conflicts or disturbing emotions) competing for my attention. I remember focusing on the vision of ascending horses intending my consciousness/spirit to join this energy, and not wanting to entertain these lower darker energies. At one point, I felt the lower part of my body being in the roots of this dark energy that I consciously had to extract myself from.

A significant aspect of the journey for me was the occasions on which I left the room with a desire to vomit in order to cleanse myself, which is a typical emetic action of the medicine. On the first occasion I went outside and getting into the garden, the impulse was not strong enough to vomit. Instead, what was available were these dark energies or 'dark materials' and I felt immersing into my shadow of fears. On this and other previous occasions having used *ayahuasca*, with the medicine working in me, it feels as if the mental state of fear becomes tangible, as if negative thoughts and feelings become visible as black, red and purple forms around me with an accompanying audible vibrational sound that oscillates in strength. These forms of energy are symbolic for me of negativity in my life. Thus, I was experiencing the suffering of palpable, yet uncertain fears. A facilitator, G, came outside and gently encouraged me to go back inside. He told me, that "inside was better, going back to the songs was better". This I did.

A second time, later, I felt a need to vomit again and went outside. The same thing happened: I could not vomit and I got caught up in my dark materials and

felt cold, shivering and struggling with my own suffering. G came outside again and asked if I was ok. I told him that I wanted to die to my old self, but that I could not. He spoke to me in a gentle tone, "It takes time, be easy ... Let go by moving ahead. Get ahead." In retrospect, I realize how important this advice was, that I could either try to get involved in an analytical process and try to work these pains out, or I could just let it go and move ahead. I experienced some paranoia this second time outside, reflecting that all that I was experiencing was bondage to spiritual forces, desires, power and attachments, but in retrospect I believe this had more to do with my own fear of being enslaved by fears and desires than anything external to me, since nothing had tried to enslave or disempower me during or after my experience. This suggests to me that one can get caught up in delusions while experiencing visions, yet one can entertain delusions without visions in everyday waking experience too. Clearly, one must discern what is true or delusional for oneself as it applies to one's life and oneself in any given moment. Going back inside, I listened to the singing and the visions were very strong and visceral. I let my body move spontaneously to the visions. I experienced an interesting vision of a funnel of energy on my head that was clearing out my mind as if deleting old files from a computer. I initially allowed this to happen, but stopped this process after a while when I started thinking and fearing what was happening.

At this time, which was towards the last stage of the ceremony, I felt I could not handle a non-specific intensity of the energy and process, and for a third time felt an even stronger desire to vomit. This time I went to the bathroom and shut myself in there. Sitting on the ground I had an awakening realization that only I could get myself out of these fears, the medicine would not, nor would anyone else. It was then that I decided with a strong conviction to take responsibility for my state. I got up, walked back inside the room and held myself upright. I focused on the music and on positive thoughts of love and compassion, and this was when I felt an energy accumulating and orbiting in my heart space that felt enlivening and joyful. Slowly and joyfully I started dancing to a beautiful song. I then experienced a clarity of thought and knowingness that was profoundly instructive: that I am human and that I need to accept my humanness and that I deserve to share love and allow myself to be loved. These knowings humbled me. I had a sensation of having suns in my eyes that made me feel radiant with healing and new hope. At this point I felt, and literally saw, energy reconfiguring and working on my reproductive system, that I sensed was having an energizing and revitalizing effect on my entire body, and that I continued to feel in the days and weeks to follow. I had a vision of myself as a healer that

conveyed the insight that I could choose to be a healer or not, but that in either case, I must take responsibility for that choice.

Then, quite aptly and suddenly the ceremony ended. The members acknowledged each others' journeys. Slowly but surely people followed their own course of action: some eating dinner, others discussing their experience, while others departed. The members were in very different spaces after their experience. One member was still struggling with an issue that I perceived as being very painful and I observed that some members were trying to console him, while another member seemed aloof and disappointed, keeping to herself, while yet other members were enjoying intimate conversations by the fireside outside. This demonstrated to me how different and unique the experience is for people. I believe that this experience calls for individual integration. After a casual exchange with Enio and others I left for home, feeling slightly tired, yet alert and calm while driving.

The following day I needed very little food and felt powerful, energetic and alive with a healthy libido returning to me after my prior depressed state. On this day I went to Kliprivierberg Nature Reserve and walked in reverence of life, being grateful to the medicine and the renewed life-force and optimism I felt. I also noted that my use of the medicine resulted in my experiencing enhanced mindful awareness, insight, and a sense of wholeness and inter-connectivity — far from the popular stigmatized belief that psychoactive substances will cause delusional fantasies and madness. That was not my experience. I felt healed and stronger than I had felt for many months. I had also experienced this freshness of being after my previous *ayahuasca* ceremonies in Peru.

Before the moment of breakthrough, I question whether I was avoiding my fears by wanting to vomit them out. When I decided to take ownership of my pain and fears, change began. The lesson was not only of owning my pain, but owning who I am. This is a choice I can make or avoid and, either way, I need to take responsibility for my choice.

Discussion

In my experience the ingestion of *ayahuasca* resulted in an immediate process of healing and recovery from a chronic state of depression. I believe this occurred due to the following reasons, and in the following ways:

- 1) The psychoactive chemicals in the preparation created a powerful mind-body-spirit connection that resulted in what appeared and felt like a profound

reconfiguration of my bio-electrical energy system in my body and which had a powerful anti-depressant action on my mind.

- 2) These healing effects were catalyzed by a strong intention to trust in myself and the medicine and take responsibility for myself.
- 3) The medicine opened me to valuable insight about myself that, if taken to heart, could act as lessons to improve my life.
- 4) The ritual experience connected me with likeminded people who provided me with new hope, meaning and valuable friendships in the months to come. These were important aspects of my healing process.

Aspects of Ayahuasca healing: The mind-body-spirit connection

In the above ways, I see *ayahuasca* as having facilitated the healing of my depression owing to the inter-relationship between the psychoactive, psychological, spiritual, ritual and social factors involved with its use. Based on my experience I believe that the intent to heal with an open, trusting and respectful attitude encouraged a spontaneous healing experience of a state of depression. In contrast, an untrusting or resistant attitude had led to cessation in the flow of healing in a previous experience. This is interesting from a phenomenological perspective, because the mind-body-spirit connections seem to be intensified with *ayahuasca*; in some way the connections are more latent with possibilities, more able to manifest and translate into reality. This occurs not only on a mind level, as psychedelics were coined for, but also on a physiological level. This phenomenon has been experienced and noted by other researchers such as Weil (Brown, 2011). This phenomenon appears to be characteristic of what I describe as spiritual medicines, medicines that promote enhanced awareness and deeper connection with aspects of oneself, of others and the greater universe, while facilitating the manifestation of one's intentions and beliefs.

A traditional Northern Sotho healer, Ms Maponya, concisely explained the action of South African spiritual medicines by saying that "it [*ubulawu*] will give you what you are." (Sobiecki, 2012, p. 216). Thus, people may experience different phenomena depending on the individual's unique individual constitution (life history, mental and physical disposition, beliefs, attitudes and intents). The medicines will help create an awareness of these aspects and thus will the individual understand him or

herself. Furthermore, according to Ms Maponya, the manifesting of intent using spiritual medicines can also happen on a transpersonal level.

An anonymous Santo Daime member shared with me how *ayahuasca* healed his depression in a different way. He explained:

I came to the Daime about 5 years ago and had been experiencing severe fatigue accompanied by depression. My first 20 ceremonies or so were very physical – I was not able to hold a book or keep up with hymns. I sat in my place and as best I could, tried to keep open and receptive to the currents of healing. I would shake involuntarily for long periods. I also experienced what I can only describe as tears of tiredness as if my whole body was being deeply cleansed. This went on for some time and I definitely felt progress, but in my case, step by sometimes excruciating step. And then at some point, I started to notice that the ceremonies were becoming easier and more enjoyable. There was a lightness of being present without any effort. Although this is not to say that the works are ever without challenge.

He goes on to say: "I have seen most success when the person commits to the process and develops strength to move through the various obstacles or resistances on the way to the root of the issue and finally address the underlying problem which can span spiritual, emotional, mental and physical levels."

In this member's case, the healing of depression took a longer period of working with the medicine. While other Santo Daime members from South Africa confirmed that *ayahuasca* has healed depression in some members, they did not elaborate on the details. It can be argued that everyone is at a different stage of their own psycho-spiritual development, so this would necessitate different outcomes for different people using spiritual medicines. I am uncertain why the sudden transformation occurred for me in this encounter with *ayahuasca*, but I would say it was a result of various factors including the spiritual work I had already done, my previous relationship with the medicine, the psychological state I was in at the time (being depressed) and the beliefs and intents that I brought with me into the ritual.

Potential mechanisms of Ayahuasca's healing depression

My experience and these other reports of healing depression are substantiated by a small but growing number of scientific studies indicating *ayahuasca's*

positive effect on psychological wellness, including depression. However, the mechanisms of action remain unclear.

In my experience, I partly attribute the reduction of the depression-related anxiety to having gained clarity and insight on some of the psycho-spiritual problems I was facing. In addition, the mind-body-spirit connection produced by the action of the medicine, resulted in enhanced energy, vitality and a feeling of wholeness. The way in which *ayahuasca* heals depression on a physiological and psychological level may be explained by an Ayurvedic (traditional Indian) medicinal understanding of the energetics of healing. In Ayurvedic medicine, psychoactive plants like *ayahuasca* are considered stimulant (*Rajasic*) in nature on the psyche level, and are used occasionally in India by people who are spiritual practitioners with a constitutional inclination towards stagnation and being resistant to change (Dr K. Mahesh, personal communication, April 2011). Such stimulant medicines can be used to shift a person out of a state of depression or inertia that is called *Tamas* in Ayurveda (Frawley, 2000). I believe that this is what occurred to me when I took the medicine.

Conclusions

In my experience, I would describe *ayahuasca*'s ingestion in this Santo Daime ritual as having created a powerful mind-body-spirit connection that resulted in what appeared and felt like a profound reconfiguration of my bio-electrical energy system in my body and also had a powerful anti-depressant action on my mind. These effects were catalyzed by a strong intention to heal and trust in and take responsibility for myself. Other South African Santo Daime members have reported healing of depression with *ayahuasca*, although in longer and different processes. It appears that the medicine engages the

individual's unique collective self (life-history, physical and mental disposition, beliefs and intents) resulting in different outcomes for different individuals. It can thus be said that each person has a unique relationship and outcome with the plant, supporting the description I give of *ayahuasca* as being a spiritual medicine. That is, a medicine that promotes connection with and insight into deeper aspects of one's core self, others and the greater universe, while facilitating the manifestation of one's intentions and beliefs. Therefore, I would say that *ayahuasca*, as a spiritual medicine, can be used effectively to treat depression-related illness if used with that intention, and with respect, trust and openness. In order for such healing to occur, the correct setting, as well as experienced, trustworthy and well-intentioned facilitators to guide one through the process are also required. Furthermore, from a safety perspective, the use of *ayahuasca* needs to take into account the mental state and personal beliefs of the individual at the time, the purpose of use, and importantly, the essential post-experience integration period that, from my experience, necessitates the support of friends and practitioners from the community.

This encounter with *ayahuasca* provided me with a first-hand experience of learning and healing from the medicine that culminated in an energetic transformation that lifted my state of depression. It also provided lessons about my life and who I am, making real to me the indigenous Amazonian description of the plants as being 'doctors and teachers'.

Referencing Format

Sobiecki, J-F. (2013). An account of healing depression using *ayahuasca* plant teacher medicine in a Santo Daime ritual. *Indo-Pacific Journal of Phenomenology*, 13(1), 10 pp. doi: 10.2989/IPJP.2013.13.1.7.1173

About the Author



Jean-Francois Sobiecki is a research associate, ethnobotanist and health and wellness educator working with the University of Johannesburg. His main research area is cross-cultural medicinal plant use and healing. His research and publications on South African psychoactive plant use (2002, 2008, 2012) have made valuable contributions to the field of African ethnobotany. He is currently studying the healing dynamics involved with the use of psychoactive and other medicinal plants by traditional healers in South Africa. He is doing this under the training and guidance of a North Sotho traditional healer whom he has known for 14 years. Jean has also used his knowledge of medicinal plants and holistic medicine in developing employee wellness training programs, evaluating a fortified nutritional intervention project with the University of the Witwatersrand, establishing an NGO focusing on food gardens production

and developing educational media on nutrition and primary health care. He is also an avid writer on consciousness, sustainable futures, health and healing for the popular press in South Africa.

E-mail address: phytoalchemist@gmail.com

References

- Barbosa, P. C. R., Cazorla, R. M., Giglio, J. S., & Strassman, R. (2009). A six-month prospective evaluation of personality traits, psychiatric symptoms and quality of life in ayahuasca-naïve subjects. *Journal of Psychoactive Drugs*, 41(3), 205–212.
- Brent, M. (2001). *Ayahuasca, religion and nature*. Retrieved 17 May 2012, from <http://www.santodaime.org/archives/morgan.htm>
- Brown, D. J. (2011). Psychedelics and psychosomatic medicine: An interview with Andrew Weil, M.D. *MAPS Bulletin*, 21(1), 11-12.
- Callaway, J. C., Airaksinen, M. M., McKenna, D. J., Brito, G. S., & Grob, C. S. (1994). Platelet serotonin uptake sites increased in drinkers of ayahuasca. *Psychopharmacology*, 116, 385–387.
- Callaway, J. C., McKenna, D. J., Grob, C. S., Brito, G. S., Raymon, L. P. ... Mash, D. C. (1999). Pharmacokinetics of hoasca alkaloids in healthy humans. *Journal of Ethnopharmacology*, 65, 243–256.
- Eliade, M. (1987). *Shamanism: An Overview*. In Eliade, M. (Ed.), *The Encyclopedia of Religion* (pp. 233-242). New York, NY: Macmillan Publishing Company.
- Fortunato, J. J., Gislaine Z. R., Kirsch, T. R., Stringari, R. B., Sterz, L. ... Quevedo, J. (2009). Acute Harmine administration induced antidepressive-like effects and increases BDNF levels in the rat hippocampus. *Progress in Neuro-Psychopharmacology and Biological Psychiatry*, 33, 1425–1430.
- Fotiou, E. (2010). Encounters with sorcery: An ethnographer's account. *Anthropology and Humanism*, 35(2), 192–203.
- Frawley, D. (2000). *Ayurveda and the Mind*. Delhi, India: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers.
- Levin, D. A., & York, B. M. (1977). The toxicity of plant alkaloids: An ecogeographic perspective. *Biochem. System and Ecology*, 6, 61-76.
- Lima, L. M., Ferreira, M. S., Ávila, A. A., Perazzo, F. P., Schneedorf, J. M., & Carvalho, J. C. T. (2006). Ayahuasca central nervous system effects: Behavioral study. *Arzteitschrift fur Naturheilverfahren*, 47(7), 376–480.
- Luna, L. E. (1984). The concept of plants as teachers among four mestizo shamans of Iquitos, North Eastern Peru. *Journal of Ethnopharmacology*, 11, 135–56.
- Madera, L. M. (2009). Visions of Christ in the Amazon: The gospel according to ayahuasca and Santo Daime. *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture*, 3(1), 66-98.
- Mckenna, D. J. (2004). Clinical investigations of the therapeutic potential of ayahuasca: Rationale and regulatory challenges. *Pharmacology & Therapeutics*, 102, 111–129.
- Osório, F. D. L., De Macedo, L. R. H., De Sousa, J. P. M., Pinto, J. P., Quevedo, J., Crippa, J. A., & Hallak, J. E. C. (2011). The therapeutic potential of harmine and ayahuasca in depression: Evidence from exploratory animal and human studies. In R. G. dos Santos (Ed.), *The ethnopharmacology of ayahuasca*. Kerala, India: Transworld Research Network.
- Palladino, L. (2009). *Vine of the soul: A phenomenological study of ayahuasca and its effect on depression*. Unpublished doctoral thesis, Pacifica Graduate Institute. Retrieved from www.neip.info/html/objects/_downloadblob.php?cod_blob=996

- Rodriguez, E., Cavin, J. C. & West, J. E. (1982). The possible role of Amazonian psychoactive plants in the chemotherapy of parasitic worms: a hypothesis. *Journal of Ethnopharmacology*, 6, 303–309.
- Santos, R. G., Landeira-Fernandez, J., Strassman, R. J., Motta, V. & Cruz, A. P. M. (2007). Effects of ayahuasca on psychometric measures of anxiety, panic-like and hopelessness in Santo Daime members. *Journal of Ethnopharmacology*, 112, 507–513.
- Schroll, M. A. (2010). The future of a discipline: Considering the ontological/methodological future of the anthropology of consciousness, Part I. Toward a new kind of science and its methods of inquiry. *Anthropology of Consciousness*, 21(1), 1-29.
- Schultes, R. E. (1957). The identity of the Malpighiaceae narcotics of South America. *Harvard Botanical Museum Leaflets*, 18, 1-56.
- Sobiecki, J. F. (2008). A review of plants used in divination in southern Africa and their psychoactive effects. *Southern African Humanities*, 20, 333-51.
- Sobiecki, J. F. (2012). Psychoactive *ubulawu* spiritual medicines and healing dynamics in the initiation process of southern bantu diviners. *Journal of Psychoactive Drugs*, 44(3), 1–8.
- Wright, R. M. (2008). The Brazilian ayahuasca religions. *Fieldwork in Religion*, 2(3), 177-86.
-