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Ayahuasca Healing Beyond the Amazon: The Globalization of a Traditional Indigenous Entheogenic Practice

Kenneth W. Tupper
Ph.D. Candidate
Department of Educational Studies
University of British Columbia
ktupper@telus.net
www.kentupper.com

Abstract:

Ayahuasca commonly refers to a psychoactive Amazonian indigenous brew traditionally used for spiritual and healing purposes (that is as an entheogen). Since the late twentieth century, ayahuasca has undergone a process of globalization through the uptake of different kinds of socio-cultural practices, including its sacramental use in some new Brazilian religious movements and its commodified use in cross-cultural *vegetalismo* practices, or indigenous-style rituals conducted primarily for non-indigenous participants. In this article, I explore the rise of such rituals beyond the Amazon region, and consider some philosophical and political concerns arising from this novel trend in ayahuasca use, including the status of traditional indigenous knowledge, cultural appropriation, and intellectual property. I discuss a patent dispute in the United States and allegations of biopiracy related to ayahuasca. I conclude the article with some reflections on the future of ayahuasca drinking as a transnational sociological phenomenon.

Keywords: ayahuasca, globalization, traditional indigenous knowledge, intellectual property, cultural appropriation, biopiracy, *vegetalismo*, entheogen

[p. 117] In this article, I consider the globalization of ayahuasca (Tupper 2008), a sociological trend that presents a number of significant philosophical and practical issues for indigenous peoples, scholars and policy-makers. ‘Ayahuasca’ (pronounced EYE-uh-WAH-skuh) is a word that English (and liana and now more commonly the traditional entheogenic brew prepared from it.¹ A number of types of ayahuasca drinking practices are contributing to its globalization; in this article I focus mostly on a type not much discussed in the academic literature, ‘cross-cultural numerous other languages) borrowed from the Peruvian indigenous Quechua language denoting a jungle *vegetalismo*’, or indigenous-style ayahuasca rituals conducted primarily for non-indigenous clients. I consider how novel forces of cultural and economic globalization [p. 118] have shaped the trajectory of ayahuasca’s expansion into modern contexts and examine some of the philosophical issues it raises. In particular, I explore concerns about some aspects of cross-cultural *vegetalismo* that relate to post-colonialism and cultural appropriation. Finally, I conclude with some reflection on the future of ayahuasca as a transnational sociological phenomenon.

As a prefatory remark, and to establish my position on the research topic at hand, I begin by disclosing that I am a middle-class Canadian of Anglo-Scottish descent who has had the opportunity to experience ayahuasca and its remarkable effects several dozen times. Experienced mostly in cross-cultural *vegetalismo* ceremonies (explained below), my encounters with ayahuasca have been somatically, cognitively, emotionally and spiritually rewarding. However, I have also struggled with political and social justice questions that have arisen as my knowledge of ayahuasca, its status as an exemplar of traditional indigenous knowledge, and its globalization grows. This article is a discursive exploration of some of these concerns, but does not explicitly attempt to resolve them. It reflects a tension between the benefits I feel I have received from drinking ayahuasca and the political sensitivities I perceive as a Euroamerican who is aware of – and seeks to redress – past and present injustices stemming from the colonial enterprise of my forebears.

Amazonian indigenous peoples have used ayahuasca for ritual and healing purposes since pre-Columbian times (McKenna 1999). It is a decoction typically prepared from two plants, known in the Linnean taxonomic system as *Banisteriopsis caapi* and *Psychotria viridis*, which contain, respectively, harmala alkaloids and dimethyltryptamine (DMT). These compounds, when ingested in combination, produce a unique biochemical synergy resulting in profound idiosyncratic psychoactive effects (Shanon 2002). Deemed by contemporary drug control authorities to be ‘drugs of abuse’, harmala alkaloids are controlled substances in some countries and DMT is prohibited by international drug control conventions (United Nations 1971). Yet relatively little is known about ayahuasca and its therapeutic uses. Some basic observational research has been done on the physical and psychological effects of the brew, which has demonstrated its general safety in ritual and laboratory contexts (Callaway, et al. 1999; Riba and Barbanoj 2005), but rigorous scientific investigation of its potential healing applications or tonic properties has yet to be undertaken (McKenna 2004).

Ayahuasca is still used in Amazonian shamanic practices within a variety of traditional and hybridized ethnomedical systems throughout the region. In these traditions, aspiring *ayahuasqueros* go through an extended and difficult period of training – involving demanding dietary and behavioural restrictions – although real mastery is acknowledged to take decades or a lifetime (Langdon, 1979). For many indigenous peoples of the Amazon, ayahuasca is integral to

ritual practices, myths, cosmologies, art and music, and most other aspects of cultural life (Gow 1994; Reichel-Dolmatoff 1997). Dobkin de Rios (1984) identifies several purposes the use of ayahuasca serves in indigenous shamanic traditions, including learning the whereabouts of enemies, preparing for hunting or other expeditions, to tell if spouses were unfaithful, and to determine the cause and effecting a cure of disease. In Peruvian [p. 119] *mestizo* contexts, ayahuasca healing is integral to a broader practice of plant-based ethnomedicine known as *vegetalismo* (Luna 1986).

Ayahuasca's globalization in the past few decades, however, has been driven by other types of practices, resulting from reciprocal cultural flows between the Amazon (where most *B. caapi* and *P. viridis* is harvested or cultivated) and other parts of the world. I identify three main types of contemporary ayahuasca drinking outside its traditional geographic territory. First, Brazilian ayahuasca religions, or syncretistic churches such as the Santo Daime and União do Vegetal (UDV), developed spiritual doctrines around the brew as a sacrament in the early- to mid-twentieth century (Labate & Araújo 2004; MacRae 2004). Second are the psychonautic uses of the ayahuasca brew in comparatively non-structured contexts by consumers who may buy the dried plant material by mail order over the Internet and prepare and consume it at home (Halpern & Pope 2001; Ott 1994). Third is cross-cultural *vegetalismo*, indigenous-style ayahuasca healing ceremonies conducted in an often overtly commodified way for non-indigenous clients both in the Amazon and abroad (Dobkin de Rios & Rumrill 2008; Luna 2003). However, these types are neither mutually exclusive nor necessarily exhaustive. For example, innovative spiritual seekers or healers may engage in hybrid ritual forms with ayahuasca, incorporating practices such as *reiki* or *qi gong* energy work, or maverick psychotherapists may use the brew in clinical contexts in underground therapeutic sessions.

Outside its native Amazonian habitat, ayahuasca now has a presence in dozens of countries, including other parts of South America, North America, Europe, Australia and New Zealand, and some parts of Asia. The Brazilian ayahuasca religions, in particular, have presented significant challenges to modern western liberal democratic states, which attempt simultaneously to uphold punitive drug control laws and to honour constitutionally enshrined principles of religious freedom. In the last decade countries including Australia, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Spain, and the United States have fought legal cases over the religious use of ayahuasca (for example Adelaars 2001; Hollman 2006); Brazil and Canada, by contrast, have preferred to work proactively on formulating policies to accommodate novel spiritual practices, rather than wait for jurisprudential direction through court decisions (Polari de Alverga 1999; Rochester 2006). Ironically, many of these governments champion globalization as central to their political and economic interests, yet have felt unexpectedly threatened by the cultural shifts and legal challenges that the globalization of ayahuasca has provoked (Tupper 2008). Reports of the extraordinary experiences ayahuasca produces now circulate in the media and on the Internet, making the brew an attractive curiosity in some social and professional circles. Within the past decade international ayahuasca conferences have been held in San Francisco (March 2000), Amsterdam (November 2002), and Heidelberg (May 2008), and several Amazonian shamanism conferences focused on ayahuasca have been held in Iquitos, Peru.

Most academic research on ayahuasca to date has been focused on the traditional ritual practices of the indigenous and mestizo peoples of the Amazon (in ethnographies written by

anthropologists) and more recently on the physical, psychological [p. 120] and social effects of ayahuasca drinking among members of the Santo Daime and UDV. There has been less attention given to the sociological phenomenon of cross-cultural *vegetalismo*. Dobkin de Rios (1994) has written about what she pejoratively characterizes as ‘ayahuasca tourism,’ the marketing of shamanic rituals for tourists in countries such as Brazil, Ecuador and Peru. However, cross-cultural *vegetalismo* has also grown beyond the Amazon. This has been through rituals led by itinerant Amazonian shamans, or what have been termed neo-*ayahuasqueros*, non-indigenous practitioners of traditional Amazonian shamanism (Labate 2004). Cross-cultural *vegetalismo* practices generally adhere to ritual structures of indigenous ayahuasca healing traditions, including the vocalizing of *icaros*, or whistling, chants and songs inspired by ayahuasca experiences. Discourses of cross-cultural *vegetalismo* also follow the traditional cultural construction of ayahuasca as a medicine, a superlative diagnostic and therapeutic agent among numerous important ‘plant teachers’ of the Amazon forest (Demange 2002).

In the rest of this article, I consider the transnational phenomenon of the rise of cross-cultural *vegetalismo* ayahuasca use both in and beyond the Amazon, and some of the philosophical and political issues that relate to its status as a type of traditional indigenous knowledge. People drink ayahuasca in cross-cultural *vegetalismo* ceremonies for various reasons, including seeking spiritual enlightenment, self-actualization, mystical experiences or treatment of physical or psychological ailments (Winkelman 2005). Although the Brazilian churches are in many countries a common – perhaps even predominant – vehicle for developing a relationship with ayahuasca, the overt Christianity in their doctrines may impel some to seek what they regard as more ‘authentic’ traditional aboriginal practices.

Modernity and the globalization of ayahuasca

The concepts of modernity and globalization are intrinsic to understanding the context and meaning of ayahuasca’s international expansion in recent decades, and apply to both the Brazilian churches and cross-cultural *vegetalismo*. Although modernity celebrates itself in dominant political discourses for purportedly improving the human condition, its achievements are contentious, or at least come with costs. For example, Taylor (1991) identifies several ‘malaises’ of modernity – individualism, instrumental reason and political amotivation – that prevail in contemporary Euroamerican society. Along the same lines, others observe that modernity has led to a general secularization and disenchantment of the world (Gauchet 1997; Ortiz 2003). If these phenomena are indeed provoking a spiritual thirst, the rise of the Brazilian religions and cross-cultural *vegetalismo* beyond the Amazon indicates that a growing number of people believe it can be slaked with ayahuasca.

Giddens (1990: 64) argues that one of the consequences of modernity is globalization – ‘the intensification of worldwide social relations which link distant localities in such a way that local happenings are shaped by events occurring many miles away and vice versa.’ Globalization is thus a function of the ‘stretching’ of social relations precipitated by the increased space-time distancing and disembedding of modernity. [p. 121] One of the consequences of this has been a subjugation or erasure of the concept of place and knowledge and a privileging of the global spatial flows of information and capital (Escobar 2001). As such, cultural ties to the local seem to be increasingly less important as influential factors in understanding or making meaning of the world. Tomlinson (1999: 29) calls this weakening of the ties of culture to place

detritorialization, or ‘the simultaneous penetration of local worlds by distant forces, and the dislodging of everyday meanings from their “anchors” in the local environment.’

Deterritorialization seems accurately to describe the condition of some of the contemporary globalized uses of ayahuasca, whereby the brew is consumed in geographical and cultural contexts very different from those of even a few generations ago. This observation should not be construed as an attribution of authenticity (or lack thereof) regarding the experiences or practices undertaken by people who are not indigenous to the Amazon; indeed, I should clarify that I am not postulating simple binary forms of ayahuasca use, the ‘traditional’ and modern. Rather, I am interested in raising questions such as what effect the process of deterritorialization has on the meaning that individuals may make from the ayahuasca experience. Some ethnographers argue that ayahuasca drinkers of different cultural (and by extension geographic) origins have fundamentally different experiences (Dobkin de Rios 1994). For example, Lenaerts (2006: 8) reports a ‘contrast between indigenous and Western thought processes ... [t]he former ... based on relationships, the latter on material substances’; he suggests this contrast manifests particularly in ontological constructions of ayahuasca and the experiences it produces. Shanon (2002), on the other hand, based on his research in the discipline of cognitive psychology, argues that many aspects of ayahuasca’s effects transcend cultural differences, suggesting underlying psychological archetypes common to all humans. Much further empirical work needs to be done to inform thinking on such philosophical matters, but closer to hand is the pragmatic question of the impact deterritorialization has on the politics of the globalization of ayahuasca, to be explored further below.

The discourses of modernity and globalization stem from a Eurocentric understanding of geography, history and culture that have been foundational to the enterprises of imperialism and colonialism. Blaut (1993) identifies ‘diffusionism’ as a central aspect of Eurocentrism, a notion premised on binary assumptions about the ‘core’ (that is European colonizing states or local comprador elite) and the ‘periphery’ (for example indigenous peoples). According to this model, the core displays characteristics such as inventiveness, rationality, discipline, adulthood, sanity, science and progress; the periphery, by contrast, exhibits qualities such as imitativity, emotion/instinct, spontaneity, childhood, insanity, sorcery and stagnation (Blaut 1993: 17). Diffusionism still permeates modern understandings of the transmission of knowledge and cultural practices. For example, the paternalism implicit in many of the economic and cultural policies promulgated through institutions such as the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank and other supra-national organizations betray a lingering commitment to Eurocentric diffusionist principles (Harvey 2003). However, Blaut (1993) also identifies a latent concern among modern authorities that some atavistic beliefs and practices could counter-diffuse back into Eurocentric [p. 122] society and despoil the civilized core. Favourable representations of ayahuasca and the altered states of consciousness it produces are presumably examples of the kinds of perceived maleficent subversion that authorities fear might impinge on modern civil society. Thus, it is unsurprising that a common reactionary response has been to try to proscribe ayahuasca within the strictures of contemporary drug control laws and that syncretized Christian ayahuasca-drinking practices are the vanguard of its legitimation.

Some critics regard globalization and its political, economic and cultural implications as examples of neo-colonialism. For example, the inherent Eurocentrism in discourses of modernity

and globalization are cited as evidence of their continued movement towards socio-political and epistemological hegemony (Lander 2002; Quijano 2000). In particular, there is concern over globalization's homogenizing tendencies in the cultural arena. The imperatives of the flow of global capital are seen as causally linked to the spread of modern Euroamerican ideology and culture. Indeed, 'the process of globalisation began in the West and has mainly fostered the expansion of Western ideas, values, lifestyles and technology' (Smith et al. 2000: 2). By this understanding, culture and ideology are seen as flowing from 'west' to 'rest,' an insidious foisting of Mickey Mouse, Coca-Cola, and MTV – and an implicit neoliberal agenda – on traditional indigenous and other non-western cultures (Barber 1995; Massey 1995; Rodrik 1997). Given the interrelationship between biological, linguistic and cultural diversity – and the threats posed to these by the seemingly ineluctable forces of globalization – such concern may be well-founded (Maffi 2001).

However, the cultural aspects of globalization made possible by modern communications technologies are a double-edged sword. In Giddens' (1990: 77) analysis, 'technologies of communication have dramatically influenced all aspects of globalization ... [forming] an essential element of the reflexivity of modernity and of the discontinuities which have torn the modern away from the traditional.' While this may be the case, it is not a given that globalization will result in a homogenous Euroamerican cultural domination, the 'coca-colanization' that some fear. There is also a dialectical undercurrent in cultural globalization that produces the kind of counter-diffusion that Blaut (1993) identifies, a means for subaltern voices and thoughts to filter back into the dominant core. As Appadurai (1996: 32) asserts, 'the new global cultural economy has to be understood as a complex, overlapping, disjunctive order, which cannot any longer be understood in terms of existing center-periphery models.' Thus, cultural globalization opens paths for the movement of ideas, beliefs and practices multi-directionally, in ways that enable previously marginalized communities to assert their political and cultural autonomy. For example, 'globalisation provides the chance for Indigenous peoples to advance recognition and acceptance of their cultural values in innovative and effective ways and to empower themselves by harnessing the power of public opinion and by becoming familiar with each other's problems, solutions and effective strategies' (Smith et al. 2000: 4). The top-down model of cultural dissemination fails to recognize the potential of new media such as the Internet to allow for the networking of subaltern voices and the [p. 123] democratization of knowledge production, which have arguably played an integral role in the expansion of ayahuasca use beyond the Amazon.

The Internet is one of the most important drivers of globalization today, an information and communication tool exerting unprecedented economic, social and intellectual changes. Its role in disseminating knowledge and opinions about ayahuasca in the past decade has been instrumental in spreading cross-cultural *vegetalismo* (and the brew more generally) beyond the Amazon. As Panagakos and Horst (2006: 117-118) observe, 'while the Internet may not transform entire societies and is inundated with corporate and marketing agendas, it can still be an important social outlet and empowerment tool for smaller communities driven by common identities, ideologies and localized interests.' The inception of the World Wide Web during the 1990s established novel sociological conditions for ayahuasca to enter the popular mindscape of Euroamerican culture in the way it has. Indeed, equally prevalent as the use of brew itself are online narratives about the ayahuasca experience, which generally emphasize healing, personal

insight and spiritual transformation. Yet, whereas in the 1960s governments were able to counter discourses lauding similar kinds of substances, such as LSD and mescaline, with one-sided deprecatory representations that served their political interests, today authorities are hard-pressed to challenge the volume and scope of information about ayahuasca easily available to the lay public. The use of the Internet by ayahuasca aficionados allows for a diversity of thought and expression about the brew and its effects that pose significant challenges to policy-makers. Robust and active information and social networking websites, such as www.erowid.org, www.ayahuasca.com and www.tribe.net, allow people who have had or are seeking ayahuasca experiences to share and exchange information about ayahuasca rituals. They provide information on how to cultivate its constitutive plants, how to make ayahuasca or ayahuasca analogues, and on ayahuasca tourism (for example travel information on Amazonian destinations or recommendations about particular *ayahuasqueros*).

Ayahuasca and cultural appropriation

The globalization of ayahuasca, and particularly cross-cultural *vegetalismo*, provides a useful case through which to consider issues related to cultural appropriation of traditional indigenous knowledge and spirituality. Indigenous peoples around the world have only in the past few decades begun to have some (varying) success in asserting their civil, property and governance rights and demanding respect for their languages, art and music, and spiritual belief systems (Battiste & Henderson 2000). For most of the post-contact history of the past 500 years, the value of these aspects of indigenous cultures was systemically denied by the dominant Euroamerican culture, which has actively sought to assimilate people native to colonized territories and annihilate their traditions. This attitude towards indigenous peoples and their cultures has taken various forms, from overt policies and practices of genocide (Annett 2001; Stannard 1992) to much more subtle forms of discrimination, socio-political exclusion and institutionalized racism (Milroy 1999). In some respects, however, Eurocentric – [p. 124] particularly North American – culture has had an ambiguous relationship with indigenous peoples. Despite official policies and widespread attitudes that denigrated and sought to extinguish indigenous traditions, curiosity about and fascination with indigenous peoples and their cultures has been an enduring counterpoint. The stereotype and idealization of the ‘noble savage’ traces back to the early modern works of thinkers such as Michel de Montaigne and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Some critics contend this myth is still alive and well today (Krech 1999), especially in the form of stylized beliefs about indigenous spiritual practices among ‘new age’ and other such religious movements. With respect to ayahuasca, this is manifest in some idealistic representations of the brew that are at odds with its nefarious role in Amazonian indigenous traditions of assault sorcery (Whitehead & Wright 2004).

The political backdrop of colonialism and its legacies puts into relief ethical concerns about the uptake by non-indigenous people of such practices as ayahuasca drinking in cross-cultural *vegetalismo* rituals. Such cultural transfers have been variously labeled, depending on political alignment, from respectful homage or innocent borrowing to outright theft or cultural genocide. In a critical light this reflects as cultural appropriation, or what Kulchyski (1997: 614) describes as ‘the practice on the part of dominant social groups of deploying cultural texts produced by dominated social groups for their own (elite) interests.’ By this view, cultural appropriation

assumes the existence of power differentials between the source culture and the privileged authoritative position of the borrower culture.

Appropriation of indigenous culture can take many forms. These include the incorporation of traditional indigenous iconography in fashion, art, or commercial design (Shand 2002); the use of chants, rhythms or other musical forms in music (Gorbman 2000); and the production, sale or use of imitation or derivative cultural artefacts. Various kinds of harm are attributed to cultural appropriation. Among these are that it undermines the integrity of the community whose culture is appropriated; and it has an impact on the cultural object itself (for example profanation of a sacred practice). It also permits inappropriate distribution of material rewards (namely financial gain) to the individuals doing the appropriating; and it fails to acknowledge legal sovereignty over a kind of intellectual property. In the following section, I take up the issue of biopiracy, a particular kind of cultural appropriation that has been an issue in ayahuasca's globalization in the past few decades. For the moment, our focus remains on the realm of spirituality and the forms of cultural appropriation that have arisen from the interests of Euroamericans in Native American indigenous spiritual beliefs and practices, which may include cross-cultural *vegetalismo*.

Despite having attained ostensible wealth, power and other markers of 'success', many Euroamericans have become disillusioned with the organized religions of their forebears and feel alienated from their Judeo-Christian cultural heritage. As Aldred (2000: 329) observes, 'in the so-called postmodern culture of late consumer capitalism, a significant number of white affluent suburban and urban middle-aged baby-boomers complain of feeling uprooted from cultural traditions, community belonging, and spiritual meaning.' Likewise, Alexander (2008) identifies 'dislocation' – including the weakening of traditional spiritual supports – among denizens of modern [p. 125] Western free-market societies as a significant factor in the rising prevalence of addictions to things such as drugs, food, money, sex and power. And Johnson (2003: 348) contends that 'what is distinct about the present [postmodern] age is not the decline of religion as such ... but rather the decline of central, socially binding religious authority.' Among the responses to this phenomenon has been an increased interest in other spiritual traditions – such as those whose nexus is the ayahuasca brew – the exoticism of which may provide a veneer of authenticity in contrast to more banal, familiar faiths.

Cultural appropriation of indigenous spirituality may take many forms. For example, the lack of connection to 'place' characteristic of postmodernity has created for some an attraction to geographic features or specific parts of the earth long held as sacred by local indigenous communities. This has occasionally led to tensions between different (indigenous and non-indigenous) groups who assert competing claims of right to access to and use of such places (Pike 2004). Likewise, indigenous cultures have lately been represented, accurately or not, as intrinsically ecological, raising concerns over their appropriation or misrepresentation in discourses of environmentalism and the revival of a neo-'noble savage' myth (Krech 1999; Taylor 1997). In some respects, the globalization of ayahuasca manifests both of these, inasmuch as the ecoscape of the Amazon jungle has been constructed in many contemporary spiritual and ecological movements as a sacred part of the earth and a focus for concerns over environmental devastation.

The case of neo-*ayahuasqueros* – people of non-indigenous descent leading cross-cultural *vegetalismo* rituals – is particularly salient with respect to questions of cultural appropriation. Although some may practice with strict adherence to traditions and the respect and blessing of indigenous *maestros*, the potentially lucrative market for ayahuasca healing is sure to attract charlatans of both indigenous and non-indigenous heritage (Dobkin de Rios & Rumrill 2008). In extreme cases, ‘white shamans’ or ‘plastic medicine (wo)men’ may (mis)represent themselves as having a connection to indigenous lineage or training and charge exorbitant fees for books they have published or for conducting vision quests, workshops, weekend seminars, sweat lodges and the like (Aldred 2000; Wernitznig 2003).

The phenomenon of plastic medicine women or men raises concerns particularly for indigenous people themselves (Rose 1992). One of these is the commodification of spirituality (Meyer & Royer 2001; York 2001), or paying money for the ‘service’ of providing a ritual, as monetary exchange in a free market of spirituality is both foreign and anathema to most indigenous traditions. The politics of post-colonialism compounds this, for some critics note that ‘interest in Native American cultures appears more concerned with exoticized images and romanticized rituals ... than with the indigenous peoples themselves and the very real (and often ugly) socioeconomic and political problems they face as colonized peoples’ (Aldred 2000: 333). Another concern is what grounds an individual has to claim competence or the right to lead work in an indigenous tradition. For example, ‘traditional [indigenous] power structures have always been concerned with ensuring that designs, stories, ceremonies, dances and songs are only employed by those with an ancestral right to practice them’ [p. 126] (Smith, et al. 2000: 10). This question applies both to non-indigenous people and to people of indigenous heritage who may lack the appropriate training or community support to represent indigenous knowledge or lead ceremonies. Finally, some have expressed concern about the effects that plastic medicine women and men have on representations of indigeneity and their authenticity both to Euroamericans and to indigenous peoples themselves (Welch 2002).

Recent contentions by indigenous peoples that neo-colonialism and globalization are threatening their traditions have highlighted the cultural appropriation of Amazonian healing practices. For example, in 1999, a group of Colombian *taitas* (i.e. shamanic healers) – the *Unión de Médicos Indígenas Yageceros de la Amazonía Colombiana*, or Union of Indigenous Yagé (ayahuasca) Healers of the Colombian Amazon – identified cultural appropriation as an issue of concern in their ‘Yurayaco Declaration’:

Non-indigenous people are finally acknowledging the importance of our wisdom and the value of our medicinal and sacred plants. Many of them profane our culture and our territories by commercializing yagé and other plants; dressing like Indians and acting like charlatans.... Indeed, even some of our own indigenous brothers do not respect the value of our medicine and go around misleading people, selling our symbols in towns and cities
(Union de Medicos Indigenas Yageceros de la Amazonia Colombiana 1999)

Along the same lines, indigenous healers in the Peruvian Amazon have expressed concern about the safety of naïve or undiscerning travellers whom ill-trained or manipulative individuals misrepresenting themselves as *ayahuasqueros* may exploit (Dobkin de Rios & Rumrill 2008). However, with awareness about ayahuasca outside the Amazon increasing, and a ready market

for cross-cultural *vegetalismo* ceremonies, these concerns are unlikely to be laid to rest in the near future.

It would be simplistic to characterize all instances of ostensibly asymmetric cross-cultural transfer of spiritual or esoteric knowledge as necessarily problematic or reprehensible. In practices as diverse as yoga, African drumming, traditional Chinese medicine, and Buddhist meditation, individuals exogenous to the traditional cultural heritage are acknowledged as capable – with diligent training and appropriate respect for tradition – of mastery of the art. As Native American poet and scholar Wendy Rose (1992: 416), an insightful critic of ‘whiteshamans’, contends: ‘the problem with whiteshamans is one of integrity and intent, not topic, style, interest, or experimentation.’ Likewise, Cuthbert (1998: 257) notes that ‘to seek to represent every transaction and exchange between coloniser and colonised as only appropriative – or expropriative – is to oversimplify substantially the dynamics of a complex field of cultural interaction.’ There exist a variety of indigenous attitudes towards non-indigenous interest in their spiritual traditions; for example:

[some] say that Native American religious practices are crucial if the world is to be preserved. Some believe that it is only pure, *uninfluenced* native [p. 127] ceremony that can preserve the world. But a significant minority argue that non-Indian participation in ‘the red road’ is necessary if humans are to reharmonize life on earth.

(Taylor 1997: 187, italics in original)

McGaa, an Oglala Sioux author, makes a similar case, namely that allowing non-indigenous participation in native ritual is a crucial step towards promoting an indigenous ecological cosmivision; as he (1990: vii) puts it, ‘if the Native Americans keep all their spirituality within their own community, the old wisdom that has performed so well will not be allowed to work its environmental medicine on the world where it is desperately needed.’ Luna (2003), writing as a contemporary neo-*ayahuasquero*, argues that contemporary non-indigenous medicinal and sacramental uses of ayahuasca represent evolving traditions of spiritual awakening.

The questions raised in considering ayahuasca’s globalization through the lens of cultural appropriation become more pointed with respect to the discourses of intellectual property. Issues of post-colonial political and economic relations between North and South are the subject of heated controversy, with charges of biopiracy frequently leveled in the areas of agricultural and pharmaceutical research and industry. As we shall see, ayahuasca has been a focal point in at least one such controversy, leaving open questions about who benefits from the transfer of knowledge from indigenous cultures and the inherent lack of reciprocity in contemporary global economic structures. This may apply not only to practices of corporations, but also to some purveyors of ayahuasca, both in the Amazon and abroad, who can charge relatively affluent clientele substantial fees for their shamanic services.

Commodification, intellectual property and biopiracy

The ayahuasca brew is a complex decoction that is evidence of an advanced form of pharmacognosy among the indigenous peoples of the Amazon, an example *par excellence* of cultural intellectual property. Ayahuasca’s most characteristic psychoactive effects cannot be achieved without the specific combination of its two primary plant constituents, *B. caapi* and *P.*

viridis. The knowledge of combining these two particular species – out of the tens of thousands in the Amazon forest – and preparing them in such a manner as to potentiate their pharmacological action is a remarkable example of phytochemical engineering. How such knowledge was developed and perfected in an accompanying ritual context that may generate or optimize therapeutic effects is an enigma to western science. Both Davis (1996) and Narby (1998) independently report that the Amazonian indigenous peoples they met while doing ethnobotanical fieldwork did not see any mystery in their knowledge of ayahuasca, declaring matter of factly that the spirits of the plants taught them. In any case, ayahuasca and the thousands of other medicinal plant preparations known to indigenous peoples, both in the Amazon and elsewhere, are testaments to a complex knowledge system of botany and pharmacology. However, the discordance of [p. 128] Amazonian indigenous pharmacognosy and spiritual belief systems with western capitalist imperatives relates to ayahuasca in very real ways through the recent case of a US patent on the *B. caapi* vine.

In November 1984, an American named Loren Miller filed for a patent on a ‘new and distinct’ *B. caapi* vine that he had named ‘Da Vine’ – the claim to novelty was based on ‘the rose color of its flower petals which fade with age to near white, and its medicinal properties’ (Miller 1984). The United States Patent and Trademark Office (PTO) issued the patent in June 1986. When South American indigenous peoples learned that one of their most sacred medicinal plants had been patented, they sought redress with the help of the Centre for International Environmental Law (CIEL). On behalf of the Coordinating Body of Indigenous Organizations of the Amazon Basin (COICA) and the Coalition for Amazonian Peoples and Their Environment (Amazon Coalition), CIEL formally filed a request to the PTO for re-examination of the ‘ayahuasca patent’ in March 1999 (Centre for International Environmental Law 1999). The CIEL request argued that the ‘Da Vine’ patent should be rescinded for failing to meet several requirements of the US Plant Patent Act. Specifically, it charged that ‘Da Vine’ was neither distinct nor new, that it was found in an uncultivated state, and that its patenting violated the public policy and morality aspects of the Plant Patent Act (Centre for International Environmental Law 1999).

In November 1999, the PTO revoked Miller’s patent, but only on the grounds that the so-called invention had been previously described; they refused to consider the issues of whether traditional indigenous knowledge of a plant or its uses should be considered ‘prior art’ or whether the patent violated the Plant Patent Act’s public policy and morality conditions (Wiser 1999). Subsequently, Miller exercised his right to appeal against the PTO’s rejection and, in January 2001, without allowance for any further consideration of opposing views, the PTO reversed its decision, reinstated the ‘Da Vine’ patent, and closed the file (Wiser 2001). The Amazonian indigenous peoples who initially sought the rejection were understandably outraged, but had no further legal recourse. For Miller, the final decision was a symbolic victory rather than a material one, as the life span of the original patent was 17 years; in June 2003 it expired and cannot be renewed (Centre for International Environmental Law 2003). For indigenous peoples, however, in this specific case and more generally, the decision was a symbolic loss. The PTO reasserted the privileged authority of Eurocentric views of knowledge and property, effectively denying both the spiritual value of the ayahuasca vine for Amazonian indigenous peoples and the legitimacy (or even recognition) of prior art in their ceremonial and oral traditions.

The ayahuasca patent case centred on a paradigmatic instance of biopiracy, or the appropriation of traditional indigenous plant knowledge for personal or corporate financial gain, without acknowledgement or equitable compensation (Shiva 1997). After several decades of focusing on computer modeling and synthetic drug development, pharmaceutical companies in the 1980s once again began to appreciate the potential of the biosphere as a resource for potentially lucrative drug discoveries (Newman 1994). Moreover, many also realized that using indigenous informants to guide the research process could be invaluable, as the random screening of species for [p. 129] pharmacological activity is a slow, costly and uncertain endeavour. Although the newfound corporate interest in plant compounds held the promise of providing economic justifications for ecological preservation and biodiversity protection, it also threatened to be yet another source of injustice for indigenous peoples whose traditions and territories were open to further exploitation. Indeed, some critics decried ‘bioprospecting’ as a neo-colonial enterprise that perpetuated political and economic disparities between North and South (Merson 2000; Mgbeoji 2006). The possibility that indigenous knowledge might constitute intellectual property was absent from much of the mainstream economic discourse on drug discovery in the rainforest.

The concept of intellectual property has its origins in the proto-patents that were conceived in the Italian city-state of Venice in the fifteenth century; not long afterwards, the idea spread to other parts of Europe as social, political and economic conditions shifted with the advent of modern nation-states (May & Sell 2006). Perhaps tellingly, the *United States’ Constitution’s* Article 1, section 8, clause 8 – ‘securing for limited times to authors and inventors the exclusive right to their respective writings and discoveries’ – contains the only instance of the word ‘right’ in that document (Novak 1996). Romantic notions of individual genius and the heroic inventor at the turn of the nineteenth century further strengthened the concept of intellectual property, as did the development of the institution of the corporation, which attended the rise of Industrial Revolution. Colonialism and mercantilism in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries also helped spread the concept around the world in the nascency of globalization (Mgbeoji 2006). Today intellectual property is a driving force of contemporary free market capitalism, although new technologies – for example wikis, file sharing and the open source movement – pose the intriguing prospect that the concept may in future be rendered a quaint anachronism.

The expansion of the concept of patents and intellectual property has slowly encroached into the arena of life forms, beginning with the US *Plant Patent Act* of 1930, which limited intellectual property claims to only asexually reproduced flora (Kloppenborg 2004). Prior to this legislation, plants and other organisms were regarded as common property. By the 1940s, European countries followed suit in enacting similar plant patent laws and in 1961 the International Convention for the Protection of New Varieties of Plants extended the concept to sexually reproduced flora (Gorman n.d.). Today, with the advent of bioengineering and recombinant DNA, the question of patenting life forms and germplasm (that is an organism’s genetic information) is more pressing than ever. Corporations actively pursue their economic interests in keeping with international trade agreements such as the Agreement on Trade Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS), and are unlikely to abandon enterprises that critics contend amount to ‘enclosure’ of the biosphere. As Mgbeoji (2006: 88) puts it, there has been ‘a deliberate lowering of the threshold for patentability and several other forms of judicial and legislative intervention in the patent law system that have resulted in serving the ever-expanding

appetite and interests of Western corporate seed merchants and pharmaceutical and biotechnological industries.’

[p. 130] The concept of intellectual property is foreign to the traditions of many non-western cultures, especially indigenous cultures. Indeed, ‘indigenous peoples do not view their knowledge in terms of property at all – that is, something that has an owner and is used for the purpose of extracting economic benefits – but in terms of community and individual responsibilities’ (Battiste & Henderson 2000: 71). At the same time, Eurocentric culture has long denied that traditional indigenous knowledge or practices had any value at all, or if so, that they were part of the intellectual commons and thus free to be appropriated and used without recompense. As Lander (2002: 260) puts it, ‘since the Eurocentric colonial assumption is that the only possible knowledge is Western university and industrial knowledge, it follows that only knowledges which correspond to this paradigm can be registered and protected as intellectual property. All other ways of knowing can be freely appropriated.’

That indigenous peoples might deserve recognition or compensation for their traditional knowledge only began to be taken seriously in the 1980s (Huft 1995). For example, in 1988 the International Society of Ethnobiology held its First International Congress in Belem, Brazil, where in cooperation with indigenous peoples it produced the ‘Declaration of Belem,’ the first international document ‘specifically calling for the just compensation of native peoples for their knowledge and the legal defense of indigenous IPR [intellectual property rights]’ (Posey 1990: 14). As Coombe (1997: 88) suggests, political claims such as those of intellectual property rights are unlikely to be heard unless they are expressed in ‘the language that power understands ... that of possessive and expressive individualism.’ Today, despite its being an alien notion, more indigenous peoples are asserting that their cultural and intellectual resources do indeed constitute intellectual property and are demanding equitable compensation for sharing this knowledge.

The question of intellectual property with respect to ayahuasca, however, goes beyond just its material production. The most effective use of ayahuasca for healing or divination may involve not just its preparation and consumption, but its incorporation into ritual contexts. Ritual practices in the *vegetalismo* tradition of ayahuasca healing involve structures of interpersonal organization, spatio-temporal organization, singing and chanting, and the uses of other kinds of plants (for example tobacco). At present, most intellectual property regimes do not regard ceremonial arts as a kind of knowledge that warrants protection in the same way as technological or biological knowledge does. However, the World Intellectual Property Organization has recently argued that ‘traditional cultural expressions’ (for example stories, songs, dances, designs, and rituals) may be a knowledge form that deserves protection as intellectual property (World Intellectual Property Organization n.d.). In particular, such intellectual property protection of traditional cultural expressions could assist indigenous and other communities in protecting their cultural heritage and diversity.

While the growth of cross-cultural *vegetalismo* may seem to be a threat to intellectual property considerations, it could function in ways that protect the integrity of traditional ayahuasca healing practices. As mentioned above, the Yurayaco Declaration was an attempt by some indigenous *ayahuasqueros* in South America to express their concern about the risks that can result from the administration of [p. 131] ayahuasca by unskilled or unscrupulous ‘wannabes’

who might well be more concerned about the health of their bank accounts than about that of their clients (Unión de Médicos Indígenas Yageceros de la Amazonía Colombiana 1999). The spread of cross-cultural *vegetalismo* could serve to instigate the organization of self-regulating guilds or professional bodies that articulate standards of practice and duties of care for *ayahuasqueros*. How, or even whether, intellectual property laws should be adapted to accommodate recognition of the kinds of knowledge inherent in ceremonial practices is not a simple question. Nevertheless, it is one that deserves consideration because the expansion and commodification of ayahuasca drinking continues into the twenty-first century.

Finally, the commodification of ayahuasca calls into question the sustainability of its constituent species in the face of increasing popularity. Some Brazilian ayahuasca religions have begun cultivation projects to meet the needs of producing their sacraments, and some entheobotanically-minded horticulturalists have begun to cultivate *B. caapi* and *P. viridis* in places such as Hawaii and Costa Rica. However, in many parts of Amazonia, *B. caapi* is still harvested wild, a practice that may not be sustainable in the face of increasing demand. Furthermore, destruction of the rainforest in the Amazon for agriculture, forestry, petroleum exploration and other types of 'development' puts the entire bioregion at risk. Ott (1994) argues that his research on ayahuasca analogues, and publication of recipes for preparations made from non-traditional plants containing DMT and harmala alkaloids, is one way to ameliorate the perceived harm of increased ayahuasca tourism in South America. While this may be the case, his work may also have unintentionally had the opposite effect, by contributing to an increased interest in and consumption of *B. caapi* and *P. viridis* preparations by those seeking what they perceive to be greater authenticity in the traditional brew.

Conclusion: The Future of Ayahuasca?

One of the most important traditional indigenous uses of ayahuasca is to prophesy the future (Dobkin de Rios 1984); however, the future of ayahuasca and its relation to the human species is by no means clear. Through processes of cultural globalization, instances and patterns of ayahuasca drinking are emerging that are no longer rooted in traditional geographic and cultural contexts. In this article, I have characterized cross-cultural *vegetalismo* as a trend that poses serious philosophical and political questions about traditional indigenous knowledge, intellectual property, and bio-conservation. Although there may be significant health and spiritual benefits from ceremonial ayahuasca drinking, it is important that costs also be considered and weighed in future sociological, economic, and political analyses.

Assessing the future of ayahuasca also requires entertaining seriously the provocative suggestion that ayahuasca itself may have some agency in its recent global ascendance. Street (2003: 9) contends that 'while it might at first appear odd to ascribe agency to non-humans such as [plant] seeds, it is [their] existence as active presences that provides a means of enrolling others into particularly topologically extended social networks.' Yet, in traditional indigenous knowledge systems, [p. 132] ascribing agency and inter-specific relations to non-human actors such as plants is hardly a controversial notion (Lenaerts 2006). Some modern western ayahuasca researchers have embraced similar ideas. For example, McKenna (2005) suggests that ayahuasca may be asserting its own ecological agenda by emerging from the Amazon at a time when humans (at least those living in modern industrialized states) are in dire need of a wake-up call about our fundamentally imbalanced environmental relationship with the earth. Likewise, Narby

(1998; 2005) relates that his experiences with ayahuasca compelled him to reject accepted orthodoxies within the epistemologies of modernity that deny non-human agency/intelligence and inter-species communication. And Letcher (2007: 92) contends that the dominant discourses that preclude the possibility of agency in the vegetable kingdom ‘at best ... cut off a potentially fruitful avenue of consciousness research, and, at worst ... endorse a short-sightedness, a human-centered narcissism in which consciousness can only be recognized if it comes packaged in a human form.’

Public policy may be what shapes the future of ayahuasca and its relation to humanity, to the degree that this is in our control at all. The accrued benefits and harms of ayahuasca for individuals and communities, both in the Amazon and beyond, will in part be a function of decisions made by policy-makers, who have at their disposal the means – and one hopes the wisdom – to decide whether or how responsibly and effectively to regulate its growth, production, distribution and use. Such policies would, ideally, acknowledge the status of ayahuasca as a traditional indigenous medicine (and more recently as a sacrament in new religious movements) and balance competing interests of civil liberties, public health, post-colonial redresses, and free-market economics. Greater knowledge about the brew and improved understanding of its effects will be essential for making informed policy decisions. To that end, this article adds to the growing literature on ayahuasca drinking in modern transcultural contexts, and raises significant issues for *ayahuasqueros* (and neo-*ayahuasqueros*) to heed in the development of their practices, for scholars to consider in planning ayahuasca research, and for policy makers to factor into their decision making about the brew.

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Note

¹ The term ‘entheogen’ was coined by scholars proposing an alternative to ‘hallucinogen’ and ‘psychedelic’ (Ruck, Bigwood, Staples, Ott & Wasson 1979). ‘Hallucinogen’ is a word grounded in 1950s clinical psychiatric paradigms, which made the culturally-loaded a priori assumption that the experiences such substances engendered were necessarily illusory and false. ‘Psychedelic’ was coined as an alternative to hallucinogen, but this word ultimately came to connote 1960s youth subcultures and associated artistic movements. By contrast, the etymological roots of ‘entheogen’ convey a sense of spirituality, hence its denotation of a psychoactive substance used to facilitate spiritual experiences (Smith 2000; Tupper 2002).

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