

ALEX K. GEARIN. *GLOBAL AYAHUASCA: WONDROUS VISIONS AND MODERN WORLDS.* STANFORD: STANFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS 2024. P. 296. ISBN: 9781503636576

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Attempting to overcome simplistic, singular renderings of ayahuasca ceremonies, Alex Gearin – as suggested in the title *Global ayahuasca* – attends to the consumption of the psychoactive brew across three international contexts. These are Perú, where largely North American and European tourists interact with indigenous Amazonian practitioners; Australia, where ayahuasca is a relatively new phenomenon consumed in ‘neo-shamanistic’ ceremonies; and China, where ayahuasca is sought after for its ability to enhance one’s performance in the workplace.

First outlining the history of both ayahuasca itself and the existing scholarship in the introduction, Chapter 1 dives into the colonial and postcolonial histories of its use and export in and from South America in the 17th and 18th centuries. Chapters 2 and 3 then describe ethnographic fieldwork undertaken in Perú, and the nature of ayahuasca tourism at retreats commercially run by Shipibo indigenous healers. Chapter 4 then examines the more (though not entirely) secularised practice of ayahuasca ceremonies in Australia, where ayahuasca is a relatively new phenomenon popularised at the turn of the millennium, and where its religious significance has been transformed into a quasi-secular ‘spiritualism’ and praised as an escape from the city into nature. The final case study, Chapter 5 investigates the Chinese phenomenon – the most difficult to gain access to due to strict drug laws – of ayahuasca ceremonies performed for their ability to make one better at one’s job, as well as navigating the broader challenges of life in 21st-century capitalist China. Chapter 6 explores ‘integration’ – tracing the ways in which participants from all three contexts made the wondrous visions they had experienced actionable in their everyday lives.

The book is ethnographically rich, often describing at length the personal stories of interlocutors through the insights they reached through taking ayahuasca, which allows the reader to understand both the deeply moving, transformational potential of the brew and the rich variance in biographical backgrounds of its consumers. In so doing, Gearin strikes an effective balance between looking at broad power structures within which these ceremonies are performed and sought after while also maintaining an empathetic appreciation for these journeys.

Global economic inequality runs through Gearin’s ethnography, but he only pulls it out explicitly in his conclusion; capitalism is, as he puts it, the ‘common meta-axis’ around which his interlocutors’ psychedelic experiences ultimately revolved. This was partly due to the commercial nature of his research sites, but further, ayahuasca experiences were often

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defined by capitalism in the negative, insofar as ayahuasca retreats in Perú and Australia were motivated by a desire for escape from the incessant demands of capitalist labour. In China, by contrast, ayahuasca was sought for its *enhancement* of the drinker's capacity to labour. In the concluding chapter, Gearin offers a question for future ethnographies on the topic: how is inequality made manifest even in the experience of its transcendence through psychedelic substances?

A further tension drawn out is the desire to balance anthropological respect for cultural context with respect for the transcendental qualities of psychedelics which in many ways induce universal psychological states. Running through both the ethnographic vignettes and their analysis, this tension is made most explicit in the chapter on 'Integration and society' — this section is thus most unique and insightful. Drawing together insights from all three of the contexts, Gearin traces the diverse ways in which participants 'integrate' the lessons learned from their experience with ayahuasca into their everyday lives, and the challenges this raises for them as they attempt to both return to and transform those lives considering their psychedelic visions. It is in these processes that the cultural context most clearly announces itself. The visions, Gearin suggests, are inevitably shaped by the world in which they are experienced; this is true from the moment of seeking them out, colours the content of the visions themselves, and becomes especially salient as participants attempt to integrate.

Time is a thread that again is only pulled on explicitly at the end. However, it is present from the first chapter's analysis of the colonial history of ayahuasca, where Gearin outlines how ayahuasca brewing and consumption was in fact not a particularly widespread practice among indigenous Amazonians until the past couple of centuries — despite the widespread vision of it among white Euro-American tourists as an 'ancient' indigenous practice. It is also an undercurrent in his analysis of 'primitivist tourists' attending Peruvian ceremonies, searching for a primordial escape from the trappings of modernity. Ironically, for the leaders of such ceremonies, the commercialisation of their services is an entry point into the modern capitalist economy. The account of the Chinese experience contrasts this with the notion of an enchanted modernity, rather than an escape from it. Time does not only feature in this abstract analytical sense, however; it also figures centrally in the visions themselves. For most non-Indigenous users of ayahuasca, Gearin describes, visions are often intimately tied to the past — memories take on a magical quality, able to be recalled with stunning clarity; traumas and difficult moments are revisited — and in the integration phase, able to be overcome so that everyday life can resume with a new psychic freedom. For indigenous practitioners, however, the visionary quality of ayahuasca has been long praised for its facilitation to see the future. It is through this analysis in the conclusion that the value of this international, comparative ethnographic approach shines most clearly and Gearin's expert mediation between the micro and the macro of temporality.

Rather than tipping into nihilistic relativism (Rabinow 2011) Gearin manages to effectively communicate a sense of shared desire for betterment in a way that ultimately highlights 'the person in the social and visionary experiences they inhabit, navigate, and help to animate' (193). He deftly navigates the perennial anthropological struggle between the particular and the universal, structure and agency, with his international approach and openness to 'true' visionary experience a fruitful perspective from which to consider these questions. It not only provides an interesting and clear ethnographic account of the world of ayahuasca for unfamiliar readers, but also provokes discussion of broader themes which can be taken up not only in similar ethnographic contexts but by anthropologists of capitalism and extraordinary experiences alike.

Bibliography

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