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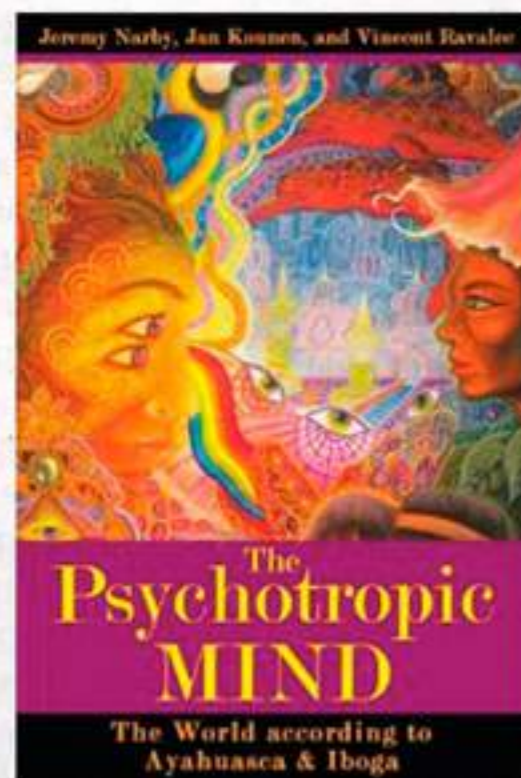
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REVIEWS

Shaman's Drum reviews books and other media about shamanism or closely related subjects such as indigenous medicineways, ethnobotany, transpersonal healing, and ecstatic spirituality. Readers are advised that the editors of *Shaman's Drum* adhere to the philosophy that reviews should *review*—not just promote—new books. We feel it is important to provide a critical assessment of the book, examining both its strengths and limitations. However, we usually do not review books unless we think they have considerable merit. Publishers are invited to send review copies to:

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***The Psychotropic Mind: The World According to Ayahuasca, Iboga, and Shamanism* by Jeremy Narby, Jan Kounen, and Vincent Ravalec; translated by Jon E.**

Graham. Rochester, VT: Park Street Press, 2010. Gloss.; illus.; index; 6 x 9 in.; 184 pp.; \$16.95 (paper).

Reviewed by Timothy White

The Psychotropic Mind: The World According to Ayahuasca, Iboga, and Shamanism offers a provocative exploration of the transformative world of ayahuasca by three innovative ethnographic researchers—Canadian anthropologist Jeremy Narby, French filmmaker Jan Kounen, and French writer/filmmaker Vincent Ravalec. These three psychotropic pioneers have been conducting cutting-edge field research on indigenous plant sacraments for decades, and they conceived this book specifically in order to alert future explorers to potential dangers and pitfalls of exploring entheogens in the Amazon. Incidentally, despite the book's subtitle, it focuses only marginally on iboga and shamanism per se.

The text is a lightly edited transcription of several casual round-table discussions conducted in early 2007 between the three psychotropic explorers. Jeremy Narby is a forty-eight-year-old anthropologist who has studied ayahuasca shamanism among the

Ashandinca and the Shipibo, and who wrote the psychotropic best seller *The Cosmic Serpent*. Jan Kounen is a forty-three-year-old author and filmmaker who directed the neo-western fictional film *Renegade* (a.k.a. *Blueberry*), which includes some scenes of Shipibo ayahuasca shamanizing (under the alleged guise of Apache practices), and *Other Worlds*, a documentary focused on Shipibo ayahuasca traditions. Vincent Ravalec is a forty-six-year-old filmmaker and journalist who has been studying visionary plants in Africa and South America, and who wrote *Iboga*, a book describing his initiation into the Bwiti tradition of Gabon.

In the process of blazing their separate trails into the realms of indigenous psychotropic shamanisms—exploring some places where angels might fear to tread—the three men have garnered extensive practical experience. Their conversations address a stimulating range of topics: assessing the real versus potential benefits of working with ayahuasca and other psychotropics; identifying the risks and dangers connected to consuming powerful plant sacraments; confronting the shadow side of ayahuasca shamanisms; making sense out of the ecological and entheogenic revelations engendered by ayahuasca experiences; and exploring the potential ramifications of introducing the shamanic uses of ayahuasca to “the public at large.”

Readers already familiar with ayahuasca should find the volume provides keen observations and perceptive insights into the deeper nature of ayahuasca, in specific, and entheogenic states of consciousness, in general. For the most part, the trio express their experience-based observations in language that is accessible to lay readers, and the unscripted dialogue adds a refreshing frankness and vitality to the text. However, psychotropic novices may find the conversations in this book challenging to follow because the speakers skip back and forth between topics, and the free-form structure of the conversations occasionally results in ambiguous referents, incomplete thoughts, and apparent non sequiturs.

One of the simple but vital observations

made repeatedly by the trio is that ayahuasca is an extremely potent and spectacular psychedelic—as Jeremy Narby says, “the Concorde of hallucinogens.” Jeremy, who first experienced ayahuasca at the age of twenty-five, offers a revealing comparison: “I already had had some experiences with hemp, psilocybin mushrooms, and LSD under my belt. I thought I knew a little about these kinds of things, and my ayahuasca experience stupefied me with the strength, power, and depth in its imagery.” Later, he confides that he now restrains himself to only one or two ayahuasca sessions per year, explaining, “A good session gives me enough material to work on for twelve months.”

Although I feel that judicious copy editing and some minor expansions could have improved the flow and usefulness of the conversations, the trio's hands-on experience with ayahuasca and other plant sacraments results in some stimulating off-the-cuff insights. For example, at one point, Jeremy briefly explains the function of ayahuasca *icaros* (chants): “The power of the shaman is gauged on the number of his *icaros*, or shamanic songs. All this fits into a mnemonic approach in which you go into this other dimension and you come back with a teaching; you bring back the essence of essences, which proves to be a melody, and you use the melody to remind yourself of it. This is the approach of the hunter, who summons the spirits like he would call game by imitating its cry.”

One of the strengths of this book is that the authors speak from the authority of firsthand experience, and they offer many tidbits of practical advice. For example, Jan offers new drinkers this useful advice: “If people are making noise because they are vomiting or crying, concentrate on your own experience, don't start [thinking]: ‘Damn, that guy giggling on the left or the person weeping on the right [is] bothering me.’ Because that is how you are going to cut yourself off from your own experience.” At another point, Jeremy advises readers: “When you are drowning in visions, look for the shaman's melody and hook your mind to that melody. Listen to it. It is like a rope: you can use it to get out when you are submerged by a vision, when you are dying, when you cannot breathe. Or else, quite frankly, pray—and I am saying this as an agnostic.... Or else, you can also smoke tobacco.”

Occasionally, I noticed hints of their Western academic training in the trio's descriptive comments, but their observations also clearly reflect their extensive exposure to transpersonal shamanic influences. For

example, at one point, Vincent explains: “I think there are things that are projections of your subconscious, things that are projections of your unconscious, and things that your own mind mixes together. Then there are the visions inspired by the shaman; there are things that are created by the people sharing the experience with you, that are the synthesis of a shared experience of consciousness and that inspire a certain kind of energy; and this energy will materialize within each person through a different vision, but that can also be an imagistic synthesis....”

It is noteworthy that, despite their keen interest in psychotropic plants, the three pioneers make a point of raising cautionary concerns about the negative side effects of ayahuasca—such as its tendency to generate messianic complexes in new users. For example, Jan comments, “Ayahuasca is one of the biggest creators of false messiahs. So, pay attention to the nature of what you are thinking of the experience in the back of your mind. Is there humility there, is this awareness being made available to the right person...?” He later suggests that ayahuasca is an amoral psycho-amplifier: “If you are someone who has deep, unconscious desires for power, it is going to activate them; if you are someone who is in love, it is going to activate love. But it is only going to activate who you are.”

In a similar vein, Jeremy reports that many Western ecologists who have drunk ayahuasca in the Amazon have experienced messianic epiphanies and have been inspired to launch crusades to save the rainforest. Although the trio acknowledge that ayahuasca has played a role in calling attention to the plight of the Amazonian rainforest, Jeremy argues that it is we humans—not the planet—who are most in danger and in need of help. It is one thing to perceive, as one ayahuasca drinker observed, that “Nature is weeping.... Gaia spoke to me, the planet is asking for help.” The real challenge, of course, is finding ways to manifest one's visionary insights in efficacious action.

Unlike some Western adventurers who have chosen to go “native,” so to speak, none of the three seems at all interested in pursuing a career as an *ayahuasquero*; in fact, they seem to doubt Westerners have the commitment and dedication needed to become *ayahuasqueros*. As Jan points out toward the end of the book, many Westerners have become fairly proficient at hosting feel-good, entheogenic sessions, but few take the time to learn the skills needed to actively heal and guide other participants. Nonetheless, he mentions that

his encounters with Francois Demange, a French apprentice of Guillermo Arévalo, persuaded him that some Westerners can become shamans.

In contrast to the predominantly benign religious uses of ayahuasca in Western countries, the authors caution that ayahuasca shamanic traditions in the Amazon are fundamentally amoral and are often fraught with dark elements. For example, Jeremy points out that the Quechua word *yachay* can mean, variously, "knowledge," "power," or "magical dart"—and that the *yachay* darts can be used to cure or to cause illness. He explains that this ambiguity is not by chance, and that even a successful healer can be subverted by his own success. "The more he heals people, the more power he gains; the more power he has, the greater his temptation to abuse it. A shaman is never lily white. He is working with power, and power always has two faces."

Because psychotropic plant medicines have been associated in traditional Amazonian tribal cultures with survival, sorcery, and psychic warfare, it has been easy for evangelical missionaries and Western rationalists in the region to vilify shamanic traditions as evil, malevolent practices. As Jeremy states, "Missionaries of all stripes have done much to put the idea into the Indians' heads that the shaman is devilish and that if they want to be civilized people and, precisely, take part in the shiny technological world, they must abandon those devilries and sorceries."

Some stories of sorcery may be exaggerated or even fabricated, but the temptation to dabble in sorcery seems to be rampant in the Amazon, particularly among shamanic traditions that use *toé* (tree datura, or *Brugmansia* sp.). As Jeremy cautions, "One of the problems of the shamanic ayahuasca world is the paranoia about sorcery and the magic darts that are flying all over the place. This is not a peaceful world. And it is true that often the Westerners who turn up in the Pucallpa suburbs have no idea, but there are guerilla zones between shamans, with all the jealousies they have between one another."

Later in the book, Jan makes the perceptive observation that Westerners actually engage regularly in unconscious sorcery through malicious gossip and other manipulative patterns. For example, he explains, "An annoyed mother telling her daughter: 'Stop singing, you are singing too shrilly,' although she is only eight years old, is casting a spell on her; she is putting a demon inside her who is going to prevent her daughter

from singing [for] the rest of her life. People don't pay attention to what they are saying or what they are doing...."

In the final analysis, this book makes it clear that the world of ayahuasca shamanism is fraught with ambiguities and contradictions. On the one hand, Jan questions how people can do negative things under the influence of ayahuasca. "I can't form the thought in my head," he says. "My body tenses up if I try to imagine this possibility. Seeing negative things caused me so much pain that it put my head in the bucket; I clenched my teeth like a reptile when experiencing certain worlds that I was to cross. I am incapable of psychologically imagining how a dedicated shaman could send harm to anyone like this." On the other hand, he cautions that ayahuasca novices can easily become infatuated with sorcery: "I have seen people, after ayahuasca sessions, trying to turn off the light with the power of their gaze or tricks like that: we are swimming in the basic substance of a primitive sorcery, weak and pathetic."

Despite the trio's wise warnings about the dangers facing novices heading off to drink ayahuasca in the Amazon, all three authors humbly acknowledge that they have personally benefited from using ayahuasca in a conscious and creative manner. Vincent testifies that, after he had struggled with Zen meditation practices for ten years, ayahuasca helped him to more fully understand those practices: "I was not under the influence of ayahuasca, but ayahuasca had turned me on to an energetic sensitivity that made me much more sensitive to Zen. And, paradoxically, Zen made it possible for me to integrate ayahuasca...."

Jan explains that ayahuasca helped him more fully understand the Hindu concept of God as the dance of moving creation, and it helped him see that God exists as a deep feeling—the feeling that God is everywhere, in all creation. "Today, I understand when someone talks to me of God. Before I did not understand and I found it was something people talked about a lot and was something a little too big to talk about."

Jeremy confides that he grew up resistant to the Judeo-Christian concept of a monotheistic God, but that ayahuasca has inspired him to adopt more agnostic beliefs. After drinking ayahuasca with Ashaninka shamans and experiencing their ways of communicating with plants and animals while in altered states of consciousness, he came to appreciate their belief in the multiplicity of spirits and immaterial intelligences in the universe. "The ayahuasca

experience I describe in the first chapter of *The Cosmic Serpent* convinced me in a highly visual fashion that there was another level of reality that escaped our rationalist, materialist gaze, and I could no longer deny it, because I had seen it."

In the last section of the book, the trio tackle several topics of cosmic consequence, such as the existence of God, the nature of "life and death," and the potential impact of using ayahuasca as an agent of spiritual evolution. Ironically, while it is clear that ayahuasca has broadened and stimulated their spiritual understanding of the cosmos, their comments point more to the variability and malleability of ayahuasca experiences than to the uniformity of those states. In retrospect, the conversations in this book seem to promote the viewpoint that ayahuasca is a psycholytic catalyst, which may inspire one to creatively review and renew one's spiritual communication with the universe. In the final analysis, this book itself may prove to be more a provocative catalyst than a definitive description of the psychotropic mind.

Timothy White is founding editor of Shaman's Drum and a practitioner of psychotropic shamanism.