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Defining Neo-Shamanic Practices Involving Dimethyltryptamine (DMT) from Shamans' Perceptions on Transcendence and Transformation

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A Thesis in the Field of Religion

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Abstract

N,N-Dimethyltryptamine (DMT or N,N-DMT) is a chemical compound that has been used in entheogenic concoctions such as ayahuasca by Amazonian indigenous cultures for centuries. When Westerners started to come to the jungles in search of this ancestral medicine, some of them became shamans themselves and brought the medicine to other Westerners and into urban areas as well. This changed the way to see traditional shamanism into what can be called new shamanism. However, it is not clear what makes them two different ways of achieving transcendence and transformation. By analyzing published interviews of shamans and neo-shamans, it is possible to re-define new shamanistic practices as a new contemporary lifestyle with its unique features that can also be considered as a new religious movement.

Dedication

To my loving father that passed away and my mother who gave me life and the opportunity to fulfill my dream of writing this thesis.

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Chapter I.

Introduction

N,N-Dimethyltryptamine (DMT or N,N-DMT) is a chemical compound that results from adding two methyl groups to a tryptamine molecule which is a derivative of an amino acid called tryptophan. Thus, its name as di-methyl-tryptamine. DMT structurally resembles serotonin itself (a tryptamine and neurotransmitter that regulates mood, among other functions) which contains one more oxygen atom. DMT's specific chemical structure induce unique neuropsychological effects when acts on 5-HT_{2A} receptors, in the nervous system and throughout the body, that are related to an altered state of consciousness or ASC.

DMT is normally known as a hallucinogen. Leo Hollister, an American psychiatrist and pharmacologist, and Richard Glenon, an American medicinal chemistry researcher, gave specific criteria for classifying classical hallucinogens (Glenon, 1999). These include alteration of perception, thoughts, and feelings (mostly visual effects or hallucinations). However, Rick Strassman, a pioneer in the study of DMT, prefers to call DMT a psychedelic (or mind-manifesting) because it shows you "what's in and on your mind, those subconscious thoughts and feelings that are hidden, covered up, forgotten, out of sight…unexpected, but…present" (2001, p. 31). It is worth mentioning that "despite profound alterations in perception, adverse effects are minimal, and hallucinogens are not addictive" (Chan & Mendelson, 2014, abstract).

DMT "exists in all of our bodies and occurs throughout the plant and animal kingdoms" (Strassman, 2001, p. 31). DMT has been found in plant species of Phalaris, Delosperma, Acacia, Desmodium, Mimosa, Virola, and Psychotria (Carbonaro & Gatch, 2016), some fungi, and animals such as toads, frogs, fish, and sea sponges. After carrying out a historical overview of research, Barker (2018) concluded that DMT is endogenous and can often be successfully measured in human body fluids. It is quite possible that human's pineal gland is capable of synthesizing and releasing endogenous DMT since it occurs in rats (Dean et al., 2019).

Some South American indigenous people have been using psychoactive snuffs and brewed drinks that contain significant amounts of DMT. They have different names such as *yopo*, *epena*, and *jurema* for the snuffs, and *ayahuasca* or *yage* for the brews. The snuffs with the powdery mixtures are blown into somebody's nose through a tube or pipe. Interestingly, in the 1950s, Hungarian researcher Stephen Szara found that ingested DMT did not work at all because of some unknown gastrointestinal mechanism. An inhibitor was needed to prevent this and it seemed that South American natives knew about it. Aronson pointed out that "Ayahuasca prepared from *Banisteriopsis caapi* vines and *Psychotria viridis* contains reversible beta-carboline alkaloids (harmine, tetrahydroharmine, and harmaline, from the former), which inhibit monoamine oxidase type A, thus enabling the oral absorption of dimethyltryptamine (Aronson, 2016, abstract). In other words, visceral monoamine oxidase (MAO) degrades oral DMT unless there is an inhibitor such as reversible beta-carboline alkaloids. Ancient South American natives got this knowledge somehow to fully benefit from oral DMT.

When a psychedelic substance is used for the purpose of spiritual development in sacred contexts is called an entheogen. This is a neologism coined in 1979 by a group of ethnobotanists and scholars of mythology (Carl A. P. Ruck, Jeremy Bigwood, Danny Staples, Richard Evans Schultes, Jonathan Ott and R. Gordon Wasson). It has its roots in Greek: ἔνθεος (éntheos) and γενέσθαι (genésthai). The first means "full of the god, inspired, possessed" and the latter, "to come into being". Thus, an entheogenic is any substance that instills feelings of inspiration in a religious or spiritual manner (transcendence). DMT is such substance since it has been used by different natives in South America and even indigenous people of Mexico in the valley of the Río Yaqui in the Mexican state of Sonora and the Southwestern United States for their own spiritual growth.

Entheogens have been used for shamanic practices. The modern word shaman is said to come from the Russian word *šamán* that means “one who knows” which seems to be linguistically linked to Manchu-Tungus languages from northern China, Mongolia, and Russia (especially Siberia). Perhaps, for this reason, the term shamanism was used by academics to refer to “indigenous practices associated with healing and spirituality” (Scuro & Rodd, 2015, p. 1).

Mircea Eliade is, probably, one of the first scholars that developed a well elaborated concept of shamanism that he referred to as one of the archaic techniques of ecstasy. This Romanian historian argued that “the shaman specializes in a trance during which his soul is believed to leave his body and ascend to the sky or descend to the underworld” (Eliade, 1964, p. 5) since he is “the great specialist in the human soul; he alone sees it; for he knows its form and its destiny” (Eliade, 1964, p. 8). For Eliade, a

shaman uses a primitive technique that involves an experience of mystical self-transcendence. For him, what makes a shaman a shaman is the fact that he or she must undergo an initiation process that involves ecstatic and traditional teachings.

Eliade also tries to figure out if shamanic practices and experiences also occur beyond Manchu-Tungus societies. By analyzing other indigenous practices in several geographical areas and those from well-known organized religions, he found that shamanic elements are also present in these so-called religions. It is important to point out that Eliade does not study the use of entheogens in shamanic practices. In the case of indigenous people of Mexico in the valley of the Río Yaqui and South American natives (especially in the Amazonian region), their practices can be considered shamanic following Eliade's definition.

A. Introduction to the Problem

There is no single agreed-upon definition for the word "shamanism" among anthropologists. On top of this, new forms of shamanism (such as urban or neo-shamanism) are making the subject of "shamanism" even more complicated to understand from an academic point of view. Stuckrad (2005) pointed out that traditional shamanic cultures in South America experienced a revival referred to reconstructing tradition implying that the old traditional concept of shamanism became obsolete. However, he stated that some institutions (e.g., government) are not aware of that. Besides this, he argued that the New Age movement of the 1960s reinterpreted shamanism as an anthropological constant and "the definition of shamanism was extended to such a degree that its very usefulness for academic analysis became

doubtful" (p. 123). This developed into a battlefield of scholarly identities and positions, from very conservative to extremely liberal approaches on the notion of shamanism.

One of these notions is the so-called neo-shamanism that is usually defined as "a set of discourses and practices involving the integration of indigenous (especially American) shamanic and psychotherapeutic techniques by people from urban, Western contexts" (Scuro & Rodd, 2015, p. 1). If there is no real consensus on what shamanism / neo-shamanism is, how could we define, understand, and regulate the practices of indigenous people of Mexico in the valley of the Río Yaqui that use DMT from the Colorado River toad or Sonoran Desert toad (*Bufo Alvarius*) and of South American natives (especially in the Amazonian region) that use ayahuasca (containing high doses of DMT) as alternative ways for achieving transcendence and transformation, taking into account that DMT has been classified as an illegal drug in several states and countries? Part of the solution would be to come up with a consensual definition of neo-shamanism which would include related terms such as urban shamanism and drug tourism.

Another problem has to do with the authority of the shaman. It is known that traditional indigenous shamans have been conducting ayahuasca and *Bufo Alvarius* ceremonies for non-native participants. On the contrary, non-indigenous facilitators have also been conducting these ceremonies in different locations such as Mexico, Colombia, Ecuador, Brazil, and Peru. If there is not a consensual definition of shamanism and neo-shamanism, what elements or characteristics should a shaman have to legitimize his/her job among the new forms of shamanism today?

B. Statement of the Problem

A study on neo-shamanism should reveal differences and similarities between indigenous and non-indigenous approaches and perspectives on transcendence and transformation. Neo-shamanism seems to be an outcome of New Age thinking that could be considered not only a verifiable form of religious or spiritual practice in and of itself, but also a sociocultural phenomenon with economic and psychological effects.

C. Purpose of the Study

The findings of this study will help scholars to delimit a framework of the true nature of neo-shamanism as a possibly independent form of spirituality that could also deserve the legal protections of any other kind of religious practice.

D. Research Questions

For my proposal, I intend to answer three research questions. First, how different is neo-shamanism, involving DMT, from traditional shamanism when it comes to achieving transcendence and transformation? Transcendence refers to the state of excelling, surpassing or going beyond usual limits of our normal states of being, consciousness, and embodiment as stated on The Center for the Study of World Religions' website at Harvard Divinity School. Shamanism can be viewed as a tradition that aims at transcendence and a resulting individual transformation with meaningful changes in society. This question seeks to find out if practitioners' perceived experience of neo-shamanic practice affects their spiritual awareness and self-awareness in such a way that they can transcend their own spirituality through conscious transformation. This is a very important question to ask since neo-shamanism isn't often viewed as a lawful

and verifiable religious practice. For some, neo-shamanism has evolved from ancient shamanic practices, but for others, it is a corrupted version that should not hold neither the same validity for one's personal transcendence and transformation nor the legal protections any verifiable religious practice should have. It also has to do with whether traditional shamans understand transcendence and transformation in the same way that neo-shamans do and if such practices are equally authentic.

Mircea Eliade published his book on the universal structures of religious experience that are shared across all cultures called *The Sacred and The Profane: The Nature of Religion* (1957) in which he stated that the sacred is "the manifestation of something of a wholly different order, a reality that does not belong to our world, in objects that are an integral part of our natural 'profane' world." (1957, p. 11). This wholly different order could be the spiritual world that shamanism taps into. However, how is the sacred (the wholly different order) and the profane (the physical world) perceived from the lived experiences of both shamans and neo-shamans? It is imperative to understand what is considered worthy of reverence and respect including practices, rituals, elements, places, and even beliefs for achieving transcendence and transformation. The answer to this second research question would help construct working definitions for both kinds of shamanisms, which may eventually result in possible consensual definitions.

The shaman, as an integral element of the interaction between the sacred and the profane, needs to be re-defined. How different is the role of the shaman from the perspectives and lived experiences of both shamans and neo-shamans? This third research question seeks to identify the rationale of what makes a shaman authoritative. I

believe that the authority of a shaman is constructed and legitimized by not only the sacred (the wholly different order like the spirits themselves), but also by other shamans who empower him/her to be an instrument for anyone who is trying to achieve transcendence and transformation through entheogens that contain DMT. This question is also important for both differentiating between neo-shamans and traditional shamans, and for addressing the significance of the study.

E. Significance of the Study

If there are positive shared perceptions on the true nature of neo-shamanic practices, it is possible that these can be counted as strong evidence for making neo-shamanism as legal and meaningful as traditional shamanic practices within the United States. This is where the concrete stakes lie. It is about what counts as precedent for legal protections of neo-shamanism in places like Brazil, Peru, Colombia, Ecuador, and even Mexico. What's at stake if protections aren't granted?

F. Definitions of Terms

- Shamanism: According to Singh (2018), "shamanism is a set of traditions developed through cultural evolution that adapts to people's intuitions to convince observers that a practitioner can influence otherwise unpredictable, significant events" (2016, p. 1). For Mircea Eliade, shamanism is a religious practice governed by the reaching of non-conscious ecstatic states by the Shaman (1964).

- *Curanderismo*: It is a "traditional Mexican American healing system that holistically treats disorders through religious, spiritual, and health-related means" (Torres & Hicks, 2016).
- Neo-shamanism: According to Scuro and Rodd (2015), "neo-shamanism is a set of discourses and practices involving the integration of indigenous shamanic and psychotherapeutic techniques (especially American) by people from urban, Western contexts" (p. 1). Therefore, it is usually referred as a westernized form of traditional shamanism that has become a common spiritual practice for many New Age seekers. It involves altered states of consciousness (often, but not always, using psychoactive drugs like ayahuasca or *Bufo Alvarius*).
- Drug tourism: According to Valdez (2017), recreational drug tourism or narcotourism is "the phenomenon by which persons become attracted to a particular location because of the accessibility of licit or illicit drugs and related services" (p. 1).
- Entheogen tourism: An entheogen is a substance traditionally used for religious and spiritual rituals such as ayahuasca. Tourism that involves an experience with this kind of substance is referred to as entheogen tourism. It can be viewed as a subset of drug tourism.
- DMT: Dimethyltryptamine is a substance present in many plants and animals (including humans) that cause psychedelic experiences. Some people consider it a recreational psychedelic drug while others see it to connect with their own selves that will let them achieve spiritual transcendence and evolution. It is

important to understand the implications of perceiving DMT either as part of a natural form of achieving personal transcendence or a mere recreational drug that should be banned at all costs.

Chapter II.

Literature Review

Most literature on N,N-dimethyltryptamine (DMT) focuses on its overall effects when it comes to mental and physical health. Strassman's research on DMT and its relation to near-death and mystical experiences is, perhaps, the most important review on the nature of DMT. He could be considered one of the pioneers of DMT research. His work is a must to understand the relationship between DMT and transcendence and transformation.

When it comes to perceptions towards the use of DMT in the case of toad medicine *(Bufo Alvarius)* for transcendence and transformation, existing studies are mostly focused on its physical and mental effects. Some other works deal with personal experiences told by researchers who became medicine facilitators themselves. For instance, Sandoval, along with James Oroc and Ralph Metzner, are pioneers in the study of *Bufo Alvarius*. Sandoval's spiritual journey led him to become a toad medicine facilitator, a medicine man, of more than 5,000 ceremonies all over the world. He is the author of *The God Molecule*, *The Bufo Medicine Codex* and *Bufo Alvarius and the Entheogenic Experience*. These books are the best reference when it comes to transcendence and transformation when using *Bufo Alvarius.*

Cortina, Segovia, and Horák's work (2019) is one of the few articles that deals with other issues in relation to the toad medicine. Their article reviews that rituals using *Bufo Alvarius* are products invented by neo-shamanic practitioners.

Apart from the biochemical and physiological effects caused using DMT, some research focuses on the phenomenon of recreational drug tourism (also called narcotourism, entheogenic tourism, psychedelic tourism, or even shamanic tourism). For instance, Flaherty, Maxemous, Nossier, and Bui (2017) explore the phenomenon of recreational drug tourism, its current status, with a focus on the profile of modern drug tourists, "drug tourism destinations, health risks, and prevention strategies" (p. 1). This article helps understand the overall phenomenon of drug tourism.

Literature is also full of case studies, especially on ayahuasca in Peru. For instance, Wolff's book (2020) presents three empirical studies carried out in Peru from an interdisciplinary approach for the reader to understand present ayahuasca research in Peru. It is especially important when it comes to drug tourism and how it relates to defining neo-shamanic practices.

Labate's works (2017 & 2018) are of special attention. Her first book includes different articles on the sociological and anthropological impacts of ayahuasca worldwide that are directly related to transcendence and transformation in neo-shamanic practices. Her second book follows the 2017 edition on the sociological and anthropological impacts of ayahuasca worldwide that includes legislation topics that are relevant to defining neo-shamanic practices involving DMT.

Very little research focuses on the sociological and anthropological impacts of ayahuasca or Bufo Alvarius or in the phenomenology of DMT for transcendence and transformation. For instance, Singh (2018) proposes

> a cultural evolutionary theory to explain why shamanism consistently develops and, in particular, (1) why shamanic traditions exhibit recurrent features around

> the world; (2) why shamanism professionalizes early, often in the absence of other specialization; and (3) how shifting social conditions affect the form or existence of shamanism. (p. 1)

This theory helps delimit and define current practices with DMT for transcendence and transformation. On the other hand, Scuro and Rodd (2015) present the different definitions of neo-shamanism that originated from Mircea Eliade's book on Shamanism of 1951 until the present. It covers clarification of definitions and distinctions among traditional and non-traditional shamanism which includes core shamanism, neo-shamanism, and urban shamanism. It helps define neo-shamanic practices that include DMT, which is highly related to my research questions.

Some of the literature focus on what the shamanic practice of giving the medicine looks like from an objective observation and the conclusions that can be drawn from it. For instance, Almendro's book (2018) is about research on shamanic practices involving DMT. It is written in Spanish which offers a different perspective on how researchers view ayahuasca practice for transcendence and transformation. Fotiou's work (2020) is especially important when it comes to the impact of shamans' long speeches delivered before or during rituals that helps to frame the way that the experience is conceptualized by the participants, ultimately increasing its meaningfulness. However, it is not clear if this framing, as she calls it, is a regular step during traditional shamanic rituals, or if it is part of the neo-shamanic practices. Another example is Dean's work (2018) who carried out an ethnographic study that examined five indigenous South American shamans' magico-spiritual identity work and sense giving in the selling and delivering of ayahuasca ceremonies. All these works are very important for establishing what a traditional shaman profile should look like, and, thus, they may serve as a reference for contrasting shamans

from neo-shamans. Ivanescu and Berentzen (2020) is, perhaps, the only work in the literature that tries to understand modern shamanism and its relationship to traditional shamanism by examining self-narratives of fourteen Westerners who became shamans and what their roles as shamans are. This work may help identify critical features of neo-shamanism that are necessary to answer the proposed research questions.

Some literature focuses on the economic impact and anthropological issues of shamanic practices as attested in two specific works. First, Davidov's (2010) who studied the impact of entheogen tourism on the traditional practice of shamanism among the Kichwa population in Ecuador. She concludes that the emergence of shamanism as a lucrative profession within the tourism industry challenges the Kichwa traditional categorization of shamans and creates (for ‘‘traditionalists’’) a category of shamans. This case may serve as a reference point to understand how different neo-shamanism is from shamanism, at least, in the Ecuadorian context.

Von Stuckrad (2005) reviewed some books on shamanism to identify lines of conflict in contemporary shamanic discourse. He contrasted “conservative” anthropologists with those who describe shamanism as a universal tradition capable of being transformed into a modern spiritual path. He also acknowledges that there are middle positions. His work helps reflect an important new approach to shamanism: a self-critical evaluation of anthropological concepts and their contextualization in Western culture.

Overall, the existing literature shows a great deal of research on the overall effects of DMT on individuals' mental and physical health, on anthropological concerns, on socio-economic impact, and on personal shamanic journeys that led to individuals'

transcendence and transformation. However, literature lacks research on perceptions on the very nature of shamanism from a shaman's point of view that may help understand how different neo-shamanism is from traditional shamanism.

This differentiation is important to be established for two reasons. First**,** there seems to be skepticism among some traditional shamans and seekers about the sacredness and benefits of DMT for transcendence and transformation in neo-shamanism. It is important to understand the overall perceptions of shamans towards neo-shamanic or drug tourism and seekers' perceptions and expectations about these trips. A better understanding of neo-shamanism could help alleviate tensions among shamans and reassure seekers of the potential benefits of trying out DMT for transcendence and transformation. Neo-shamanism needs to be further explored from a sociological point of view to understand shamans' perceptions on the relationship between the material world and the supernatural and how this worldview could be either meaningful or functional for those who seek neo-shamanic practices.

Second, DMT is a controlled substance according to schedule I of the Controlled Substances Act of the US Department of Justice. In Jose Campos's *The Shaman and Ayahuasca*, it is stated that "while it is legal in the United States to possess the vine of ayahuasca, it is illegal to possess the chacruna plant, which contains the DMT" (p. 138). If scholars were able to validate that neo-shamanism is a verifiable religious practice that deserves legal protections, the use of DMT for religious purposes could be supported and allowed within the USA. According to Dawson and Thiessen,

> There are three different ways of defining religion in sociology — substantial definitions, functional definitions, and family resemblance definitions — each of

> which has consequences for what counts as a religion, and each of which has limitations and strengths in its explanatory power. (Little, 2016)

By using any of the above definitions, it is possible to validate any practice as a religion allowing it to obtain a legal status in terms of taxes, liberties, and protections. "Drug tourism" to places such as Mexico or South America seems to be growing since, for some people, this is a way for their own transcendence and transformation. From an economic point of view, the US could benefit if "drug tourism" were the other way round. Acknowledging neo-shamanism, that uses DMT as part of their rituals, as a verifiable religion could benefit not only those who follow it (from a psychological and spiritual point of view), but also the whole nation (from an economic point of view).

Chapter III.

Methodology

A. Introduction

I will be using an interpretive method, especially a content and discourse analysis approach, along with sociological explanations from Durkheim, Eliade, Stuckrad, Fotiou, Davidov, Scuro, Rodd, Dawson, Thiessen, Fisher and Rinehart of selected written and audiovisual material as secondary data (the data sources). Among the myriad of published books and documentaries on ayahuasca, I chose those who included interviews, conversations, personal experiences, and shamanic journeys for transcendence and transformation from shamans and those who could be classified as neo-shamans (like doctors that ended up administering DMT after their own personal mystical journey).

B. Epistemological and Ontological Assumptions

Fisher and Rinehart (2017) pointed out that understanding indigenous sacred ways is a challenge for the non-spiritual perspective of Western science. They argue that indigenous spirituality is a lifeway, a particular approach to all of life, that is not separate from the rest of aspects of social life and is usually shared orally. Anyone has direct access to the unseen that is filled with divinities, spirits, and ancestors. There are, however, spiritual specialists such as shamans that function as mystical intermediaries between the human community and the spirits. Other intermediaries include medicine people and spirit mediums. The role of shaman is either hereditary or recognized when a special gift is evidenced. These communities believe the spirits often choose who will be

the intermediary. The shamans usually go through an initiation process, lengthy training in spiritual techniques and acquisition of knowledge about the unseen. They also obtain special gifts and may enter altered states of consciousness by different techniques that may include hallucinogenic drugs. Shamanism is, therefore, part of a traditional indigenous lifeway. Neo-shamanism, on the contrary, could not be classified as an indigenous sacred way for two reasons: the word "indigenous" alludes that the shaman should have indigenous roots and, second, he/she needs a calling to be shaman that must be formally and publicly recognized by another authority in the community.

Émile Durkheim, a French sociologist from the late XIX century, defined religion as a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, beliefs and practices which unite in one single moral community (called a Church), all those who adhere to them. This definition of religion is problematic when it comes to indigenous sacred ways in which a lifeway and union with the unseen world is what best describes them. However, this definition may be expanded to suit shamanism and neo-shamanism.

Dawson and Thiessen (2014) developed three different ways to defining religion: substantial definitions, functional definitions, and family resemblance definitions. The first one tries to determine what a religion is or is not based on crucial characteristics that may be challenging to establish. The second one defines religion by what it does or how it functions in society. This definition makes it difficult to distinguish religion from non-religion. In the last one, religion is defined based on a series of commonly shared attributes that can be belief, ritual, spiritual experience, and unique social forms of community. This definition seems to be less challenging and more suitable for the study of shamanism and neo-shamanism. For instance, the belief in spirits and divine entities;

the chanting and cleansing with medicine plants as part of rituals; the spiritual experience of practitioners when experiencing epiphanies in altered states of consciousness; and the community formed in ayahuasca circles.

For Stark and Bainbridge (1985), a religion may be explained as the way a human tries to attain a reward against the costs from a supernatural power through a type of compensator (such as a religious institution). In other words, if there is no direct way to attain the reward, the person is willing to exchange spiritual devotion and practice for future spiritual payoffs. This perspective may be suitable for monotheistic religions, but problematic for indigenous sacred ways in which the general view is that humans and nature are somehow linked and there is no need for attaining a reward from a supernatural power, when that power may precisely reside in oneself.

There is a new religious sensibility that is referred to as believing but not belonging, such as New Age spirituality in which practitioners are not religious, but spiritual. Dawson (2007) argues that there are six key characteristics in this new religious sensibility: individualistic (to find the inner or the authentic self), experiential (focus on attaining direct spiritual experiences), pragmatic (the opposite of submission to authority), relativistic (tolerance and acceptance of other religious perspectives; religious syncretism, holistic (non-duality), and organizationally open and flexible (no need to commit to a religious organization).

It seems that neo-shamanism has most of these characteristics making it a good candidate to be “a new religious way”. On the contrary, shamanism is not as open, holistic, and pragmatic as neo-shamanism. For instance, traditional shamans usually have a calling (e.g., in visions or dreams) and then, he/she is initiated formally and publicly by

the community authorities. In other words, the shaman needs to adhere to the community and hereditary rules to become an official shaman.

C. Research Design

To answer the proposed research questions, a selection of published interviews and personal journeys from three sources will be used. The first source is a book that includes eight published interviews with indigenous curanderos and four from Western shamans. It is called *The Ayahuasca Sessions: Conversations with Amazonian Curanderos and Western Shamans* by Rak Razam. He is an Australian journalist who documented how Amazonian hallucinogenic shamanism became a 21st-century flourishing business and explored the differences and commonalities between indigenous and foreign approaches and perspectives. This is a very important source to understand shamans' perceptions on transcendence and transformation and on defining neo-shamanic practices.

A second source is a book called *The Shaman and Ayahuasca: Journeys to Sacred Realms* by Jose Campos who has studied with over 120 master curanderos throughout South America including Don Salon of Iquitos. The book is a compilation of interviews and conversations recorded over a period of two weeks in September 2009.

The third source is a British documentary called *The Last Shaman* by Raz Degan from 2017 that presents James' mystical journey. He is an American boy who is suffering from acute depression. After he rejected Western treatments and medications, he decided to travel to the Peruvian jungle in search of healing where he discovered ayahuasca. Over the course of 10 months, he met several shamans, traditional and non-traditional ones,

that helped him find answers and inner healing. This documentary is especially important for analyzing perceptions from both shamans and neo-shamans.

D. Limitations

As for the limitations of my thesis proposal, my analysis will be based on selected data from both published (interview excerpts) and audiovisual material (speech extracts from documentaries) with *some* shamans and users of ayahuasca (*Bufo Alvarius* cases will be excluded). Traditional shamans that use ayahuasca live in South America (mainly Ecuador, Colombia, Peru, and Brazil). Obtaining samples from representatives of all these geographical locations would be extremely difficult. However, there seems to be a certain commonality among them that helps minimize the possible flaws in data analysis.

As for the case of neo-shamanism, most representatives are Westerners that have undergone their own spiritual journey and decided to either live in such traditional areas or travel elsewhere to offer ceremonies. Their overall perceptions on what shamanism should look like may not represent the general view of all neo-shamanic practitioners. However, it is possible to identify certain patterns in their perceptions.

E. Delimitations

Even though DMT is found as an endogenous compound in many animals and plants around the globe such as in yopo (*Anadenanthera peregrina)* and acacia, this study will not explore these other entheogens. Moreover, only texts and documentaries from South American settings will be used for answering the research questions.

Chapter IV.

Analysis

A. Rak Razam's *The Ayahuasca Sessions: Conversations with Amazonian Curanderos and Western Shamans*

A total of twelve interviews from this book (eight from indigenous curanderos and four from Western shamans) will be used to make an overall analysis in regard to overall shamans' perceptions on transcendence and transformation.

Adela Navas de Garcia

Adela is from Portuguese and Colombian parents who were Methodists. She lives in Iquitos, Peru. She believes her power to heal was in her blood since she was born. That was her calling. However, she was initiated as a *shamana* or *curandera* without knowing it, since she drank ayahuasca for the first time to find a cure for her illness. It is important to notice that the word *curandero* or *curandera* is used instead of shaman. The word derives from the Spanish verb *curar* (to heal), so a *curandero(a)* is a person who heals with plants (normally an indigenous person). This word is also linked to the spiritual world and, in some cases, it has a suspicious reputation among some people who consider that the person may be assisted by evil spirits (pp. 3-10).

After three months living in her shaman's house and being on a special diet, Adela drank ayahuasca for the last time where she was given sacred songs that have different properties and functions (icaros and arkanas) by lizards in her visions. She

started her path of healing others. She doesn't have an apprentice, but she wishes more young people became more interested in learning the ayahuasca ways.

Adela is the perfect example of what traditional shamanism implies according to Fisher and Rinehart (2017), since she seems to have inherited her healing powers, but she needed to go through an initiation process that started with her illness. She also argued that women were not allowed to drink ayahuasca at that time, but her shaman obeyed the spirits about giving her the ayahuasca drink. This is another important aspect of shamanism to consider since it legitimatizes the shaman's role in the community. However, gender plays an interesting role here because the spirits seem to change the traditional paradigm by choosing a Western woman. Can it be seen as a revolutionary aspect of neo-shamanism? Singh (2018) argues that shamanism does continuously develop, and it should be studied from a cultural evolutionary theory perspective. The new shaman needs to convince others in the community that she or he can "interact with the invisible forces who control unpredictable, important events" (Singh, 2018, p. 4). If the spirits are, indeed, propitiating a change in traditional shamanism, therefore, having a Western woman as a *shamana* should not be regarded as a neo-shamanistic fad, but an evolved aspect of traditional shamanism.

Guillermo Arevalo

Guillermo is from the Chipibo-Conibos community in Peru (pp. 11-18). He is a traditional shaman from both parents. He states that he relies on his own spirits, not on his ancestors'. This is an interesting point since it implies that shamanistic practices and information may vary depending on the spiritual source leading, again, to shamanistic evolution. He was in the *Renegade* and *Other World* films. He believes Westerners need

to understand that there are three important elements in an ayahuasca ceremony: the plant, the shaman, and the patient. Even though, it is possible that the patient can download information from the plant, the patient sometimes gets confused, so he/she needs the shaman as a facilitator to help him/her comprehend. The shaman must learn about everything and about illnesses in general to cure. He explains that living things are the bridge between the earth and the spirit world. The plants communicate with living things. The role of the shaman is very important because he does much of the work.

According to Guillermo, there are three levels: working with the plants, controlling the occult elements of the spiritual world, and understanding this world and how it affects the physical one. All these aspects are common in traditional shamanism. He is fine about sharing his knowledge, but he doesn't agree with the fact that many Westerners go back to their countries to make money from ayahuasca. He doesn't explain the reasons why he doesn't agree with this phenomenon, but the fact that Westerners do business with ayahuasca ceremonies is one of the critical points among most traditional shamans. Davidov (2010) studied the discursive effects of ethnotourism in Ecuador and argued that the Kichwa community has a strong narrative of authenticity around shamanism in which "there exists (especially among older Kichwa) genuine concern regarding the perceived adulteration and debasement of shamanic practices (that, although always performative and changing have accrued a narrative of authenticity belying the traditions in which older shamans trained)" (p. 391). Is it, perhaps, authenticity one of the pivotal elements for judging what should be considered a "real" shamanic practice? Is it the elders or the spirits who legitimize such authenticity?

Guillermo also believes that because of the different kinds of shamanism (urban shamanism, shamanism for healing, etc.), conflicts arise for lack of consensus on shamanistic practices. He thinks there needs to be a union to resolve this situation, since the conflict leads to witchcraft, egos, and psychic power plays. Guillermo acknowledges that there is a problem regarding concepts and definitions even among shamans. The dichotomy between shamanism and neo-shamanism is not clear enough which causes major conflicts. It is an issue that needs to be resolved not only for academic purposes but also for personal liability since using witchcraft and the like should not be the way for developing an ethical shamanic practice. Scuro and Rodd (2015) reviewed the history of neo-shamanism and the work of Michael Harner (1980) who coined the concept of core shamanism which is a universal way anyone can tap into in order to achieve altered states of consciousness, enter alternative realities, and interact with the spiritual beings encountered there. All the other elements that accompany the shamanic experience are just cultural garments that happen to conflict with each other. This definition may legitimize urban or neo-shamanism, but the role of authenticity remains unsolved.

Percy Garcia Lozano

He is a young curandero in his early 30s who has been trained from the age of 10 by his grandfather (pp. 19-26). He thinks you don't choose to be a curandero. However, he doesn't understand why his grandfather considered him to be the chosen one. Percy is another good example of a shaman that inherits his/her authority. Interestingly, it seems that he doesn't fit this job because he shares the tradition plus the views of a globalized work making him a cultural hybrid. Is there perhaps an assumption that a "real" shaman

should be pure and not hybrid? This also should be considered when trying to identify the key elements that differentiate shamanism from neo-shamanism.

Percy is interested in marketing his business for the Westerners. According to Dean (2018), there is "local perception that shamans overtly profit from the commercialization of indigenous knowledge with subsequent attempts being made to stigmatize shamans as malevolent practitioners engaged in 'evil witchcraft'" (p. 1618). Because of this perception, these shamans "encourage their tourists to buy products and services from these communities" (p. 1618) resulting in an increased local prosperity (even through them) and mitigation of shaman stigma. Percy does not give any reasons for marketing his business for the Westerners, but commercialization of indigenous knowledge is another element that needs to be considered when trying to understand the difference between shamanism and neo-shamanism.

Elias Mamallacta

Elias comes from an Ecuadorian family of curanderos, the Mamallactas (pp. 27-32). He believes in preserving indigenous knowledge and land since it is of the Mother or the spirit of the earth. He states that Peruvian shamans are more used to doing business with ayahuasca than those of Ecuador. He believes this is wrong. He also believes it is not the Westerners' fault but shamans' since they exploit North Americans for money. Shamans' perceptions on money matters seem to change from place to place and from time to time. Davidov (2010) conducted a study with Ecuadorian Kishwa communities and concluded that entheogen tourism caused the emergence of shamanism as a lucrative profession in which a category of new performative shamans lacking intracultural

credentials (such as long training and dieting) emerged. This phenomenon resulted in current tensions around shamanism when it comes to legitimacy and authenticity. It seems that shamanism not only evolves but is interculturally and intraculturally constructed. Davidov implies that it is tourists who are causing the change in Ecuadorian Kishwa communities. For Elias, it is some greedy Peruvian shamans who are causing the change. Is it fair to say that entheogenic tourism is an intercultural factor that is causing the emergence of neo-shamanism?

Like Guillermo, Elias also thinks shamans should come together on common ground to share their own techniques learned through the years when communicating with the spiritual world. This is an intracultural approach that is lacking for establishing a more established common core for what should be regarded as shamanism (Harner's idea). In other words, it seems that anyone can tap into the nature of shamanism, but the techniques should be acknowledged among experienced shamans who may eventually develop a way to give authority to this vocation.

Don Francisco Montes Shuna

Don Francisco Montes is a *perfumero/curandero* with Capanahua origins from Peru (pp. 33-42). A *perfumero* is a person who works with the spirits of flowers. He was trained by his suniruna grandmother when he was very young. He states that it was she who chose him to continue the *curanderismo* path. Again, his vocation was legitimized by his ancestors who also were shamans, which is a typical trend in traditional shamanism and part of the intracultural approach.

He was instructed by the spirits to found the Sachamama Ethnobotanical Garden in 1990. The fact that a spirit instructs a shaman to build a healing place should be a legitimating factor to reach a desirable common ground. In the case of Adela, it was her shaman's spirits who gave instruction about her training although women were not allowed to become shamans (at least in her community). This reminds us of some people who were also instructed by the Divine to carry out architectural works such as Moses who was instructed to build the holy tabernacle or to preach before Gentiles in the case of apostle Paul through Ananias, a prophet from Damascus (Acts 9:10-16).

Don Francisco believes that the arrival of Westerners looking for healing and understanding caused other problems within local shamans since they preferred to assist tourists instead of locals because of the money. This is again another consequence of entheogenic tourism as an intercultural factor of change. He also explains that each plant and living being has its own powers and properties and there is no conflict among them. They are neutral. It seems that recognition of the world of spirits and its attributes is common ground for traditional shamans. Like Guillermo, Don Francisco admits that the problem is human's ego who is in constant search of power. He even points out that jealousy is a common trend that needs to be addressed with protective energy. Ironically, there is no competition among plants but among people when it comes to individual powers. Is entheogenic tourism causing a bigger gap and feeding those egos?

He is very optimistic about the spirit of ayahuasca going to faraway places. He argues that "shamanism is becoming like a worldwide religion" (p. 41). It is interesting to see how he considers this phenomenon to become a global religion. Following Harner's core shamanism, Don Francisco's perspective is not far from reality. If anyone can tap

into a spiritual world by consuming entheogens such as ayahuasca and be guided and instructed by spirits (without the legitimization or special training by another shaman), then neo-shamanism could be considered a true religion. Dawson and Thiessen (2014) use 1958 Wittgenstein's definition of games to explain a type of religion called the family resemblance model which is defined on the basis of a series of commonly shared attributes. In other words, religions are like games with distinctive and shared elements noting that not every religion will have all the attributes. This type of religion may include four attributes: particular types of belief, ritual, experience, and social form. Can neo-shamanism fit the perspective of the family resemblance model whenever a person decides to follow the path of the entheogen in a more personal and transcendental level?

Norma Panduro Navarro

She was born in Iquitos, Peru. She was initiated in *curanderismo* after developing tuberculosis (pp. 43-52). Her Shipibo master asked the spirits if they would heal her, and they said yes. Again, this is a case in which the spirit legitimizes the shaman's work and, interestingly, it is linked to an illness like in the case of Adela. Is illness also a legitimizing factor that gives authority to the future shaman? After many months, she was finally healed and was instructed in the feminine energy of the plants. She states that the universe choses people for this path. To be chosen by the spiritual world is one of the common patterns in traditional shamanism. However, this is also common in monotheistic religions like Christianity in which there are several examples of chosen ones for specific tasks. This fits perfectly with the family resemblance model.

She believes that everything has both masculine and feminine energies. The problem for her is that many shamans don't love themselves and don't accept exactly what they are. They should recognize their feminine side. She states that there is prejudice towards *curanderas* since it is believed it's a male job. She wants to empower women through Estrella Ayahuasca Center and with the help of her copartner Paula Harbrink Numan alias Tarzana. It seems that a trait of traditional shamanism is that is male-oriented. It's similar to ancient Hebrew religion, Islam, and most Christianity. Neo-shamanism seems to break that pattern by redefining the role of gender, a change initiated by the spiritual world.

Don Juan Tangoa Paima

He considers himself a mestizo, a mix between indigenous and Spanish roots. He comes from a family of *curanderos* (pp. 53-63). He wants to work for free in his community. He states that the shaman doctor pays for the medicine. He also argues that nothing is impossible with the science of ayahuasca and that everything can be cured in a dimensional level. For instance, a sick liver can be replaced with the spirit of a healthy one. To do this, it is necessary to travel to the spiritual dimension to find out if the person can be healed and how can be healed. It is clear that a core aspect of shamanism is the ability to heal a person. The spiritual technique is a distinctive factor that each shaman develops based on his/her experience with the spiritual world. This is part of the family resemblance model.

He also states that each plant has its own powers and properties that can be used to do good or bad things (*brujeria* or witchcraft). It all depends on the intention of the

person. He even argues that ayahuasca is 70% good and 30% bad. If people have selfish intentions and are thirsty of power, they may be influenced by evil entities. Unlike monotheistic religions, shamanism lacks a code of ethics. The family resemblance model assumes that religions are like games. Shamanism is a non-moral religion. For instance, Don Juan argues that there is a disagreement concerning having sex before or after an ayahuasca ceremony. Norma Panduro believes it is ok. Don Juan thinks it's dangerous because you can intoxicate your body and the spirit of ayahuasca could come down hard on you. He learned this by experience. Sex matters seem to be the only human aspect with some kind of moral regulation among shamans. However, new *shamanas* are speaking against this tradition as in the case of Norma Panduro.

Sara Alicia Ferreira Aimes

She is a *tabaquera* from Brazilian parents (pp. 65-72). She works with the spirit of tobacco. She inherited her gift. She drinks ayahuasca herself as a diagnostic tool when tobacco is not enough. She states ayahuasca cleanses bad things (especially if they come from witchcraft). She considers herself a medium-level healer. She also speaks of jealousy from other women and men as well. It is common for shamans to combine the spirits of other plants to reach better results. As the previous shamans, she also inherited her gift, and uses ayahuasca herself as a diagnostic tool (the client doesn't drink it). This is a technique of her own. Like Guillermo and Elias, the technique is a distinctive factor that should be shared to find common ground.

Kevin Furnas

He is originally from San Francisco (pp. 75-106). He was trained with ayahuasca and other plants for over a decade in Peru. He is one of the neo-shamans to be analyzed in this section. He stated that human beings are trained by higher energetic selves or plants and trees. This is a universal belief in shamanism. He says that the person becomes a student who enter into a relationship with the spirits of the plants that remove blockages for healing to happen. He gives an explanation for the rationale behind the spiritual world from a Western point of view. He explains that humans are interdimensional beings with different sets of energetic bodies in which rivers of light flow and intersect twenty-one times in one specific point called chakra (a Sanskrit term for wheel). There are seven major chakras in human bodies. It is interesting to notice that Kevin used oriental concepts like chakras that are known to the Western world as a way to explain knowledge from traditional shamanism. He states that all beings have chakras too and that different spirits can live in one being, except in the case of humans who have one spirit. Another important aspect to notice is that Westerners, specially from North America, are more pragmatic and logical, so he found a way to explain the spiritual world, as perceived in shamanism, in a way a Western audience would understand it. He explains that Amazonian system shamans need to diet and be trained by the higher energetic selves of plants and trees. This is also universal for shamanism. However, instead of speaking of plant spirits, he used the concept of "energetic selves".

According to Kevin, dieting simply means that the spirit of the plant is going to be with you all the time (24/7), cleansing and guiding you, while you eat specific meals. He even goes further by stating that the person's higher energetic selves teach the plant as

well. It is cooperative. It is an exchange among different kinds of intelligent energies. The knowledge that Kevin is sharing is part of Harner's core shamanism.

He further explains that the communication is not verbal. It is similar to telepathy. He states that some of these plants are visionary. However, some plants are not interested in working with human beings. In contrast, the Andean system of medicine works with the apus or spirits of mountains and earth (Pachamama). In this system, you need to pay the earth with an offering, but you are actually paying the spirits that live where you are. He prefers giving back to the Earth in his own way. Kevin is making a distinction between two kinds of shamanic practices. Could we consider that there is no shamanism as such but shamanisms? Like Christianity that has several branches that derive from core beliefs, it seems that shamanism also experiences the same phenomenon. In other words, shamanism could be viewed as an umbrella concept that unifies several distinct ways of practicing shamanism.

Kevin believes that the problem is power and control among shamans who are too busy fighting over money and women. He reckons that part of the problem at the 2006 Second Amazonian Shaman Conference was because of human matters. This reminds of Eliade's concept of the profane. He believes that if everybody worked together, the dream of the world would change.

He gives an interesting definition of shamanism. It "is the way we interact with the higher-level selves of plants, trees, apus, or stones, whatever it is" (p. 87). This definition is very similar to Harner's core shamanism. Ironically, this neo-shaman is closer to the sacred in opposition to those traditional shamans that are fighting over

money and women. So, what makes a real shaman? Is it his/her origins or his/her attitudes? Kevin is a Western guy that seems to be closer to core shamanism.

Kevin points out that many people argue that ayahuasca should be taken only in the forest. He argues that ayahuasca is not even an indigenous medicine that is "beyond a particular Amazonian tribal culture" (p. 89) since it is "a doorway for a human-vegetative connection" (p. 89) that opens anyone's chakras to the universe. Kevin's perception on the setting is very challenging for traditional shamanism, but he makes a good point. If the doorway is in the DMT of the concoction, the physical forest is not needed anymore since the spirit of the forest is somehow integrated in the molecule. This reminds us of the idea of transubstantiation during Mass in Catholicism in which it is believed that part of Jesus' substance is integrated in the sacramental bread. Could we say that the sacred is actually found in the molecule itself? Strassman would agree on that since he called it the spirit molecule.

Kevin is often looked down on because he's a Western guy, but he argues he is indigenous to North America and his spirit has lived "in every single culture on every part of this planet and on other worlds" (p. 92). Kevin is making a good point arguing that you don't need to be an Amazonian indigenous person to be considered a real shaman. He is implying that anyone who is indigenous to the earth is equally capable of becoming an earth shaman. This is again core shamanism. He even argues that the physical body is irrelevant and gender issues shouldn't be a concern when it comes to shamanistic practices. This is true when we recall the lived experiences of the traditional shamans spoken of in this section, specially the *shamanas* who were called by the spirits themselves.

Kevin reckons that money and women are the most common problems in Amazonian shamanism. Witchcraft or *brujeria* arises because of that. He thinks it is a human thing. This is probably the best example of the profane within shamanism. He argues that the problem is that shamans are often considered holy people and they are idealized. This seems to be a common phenomenon among religions. Holy people are usually sacred elements, so a shaman as a sacred person could be profaned.

He studied with the plants directly. Since the world is a school, you can be your own shaman but that doesn't necessarily mean you are wise. This is an interesting thought because it backs up the whole idea of sore shamanism in which anyone can be a potential shaman. He says that you can decide to work with a shaman, but you need to ask yourself who the person is and if there is energy compatibility that can be discerned with your intuition. Intuition seems to be one of the fundamental elements of core shamanism and should be considered as part of Dawson and Thiessen's Family Resemblance Model. He believes we are all bubbles or souls that broke off from a sea of intelligent energy that start living different lifetimes in different schools like the earth. At some point, he says that you realize what you truly are is becoming a Christ or Buddha and merging back with the sea of energy. This is a very deep the metaphysical statement that can back up the idea that neo-shamanism does help people achieve transcendence and transformation. He states that ayahuasca is "a plant that helps take off our filters…on our perception" (p. 102), that those perceptions are changed into memories and that we are a conglomeration of memories. However, when the bubble incarnates, the memory is blanked out. Again, his lived experience should not be taken for granted for establishing neo-shamanism as a new kind of religion that does help achieve transcendence and transformation. He died in April 2007.

Scott Petersen

He was an American anthropologist and herbalist who studied for over twenty-five years with Peruvian shamans (pp. 107-126). He ran a well-known lodge in Iquitos. He used an eclectic approach for healing in which he combined Western and shamanic techniques. This is an interesting case since neo-shamanism may be seen as a co-product of the mix between core shamanism and western tradition. He believed that a true healer is to step beyond the tradition whenever is needed and the ultimate goal is to heal people, which should be the main tenet of neo-shamanism. He worked with two other shamans with high standards of experience and knowledge because he argued that there are many mediocre shamans. He explained that healing is mostly an individual process along with the intelligence, perception, and personality of the healer. These are things to be considered to answer the question of what makes a shaman a shaman. He emphasized on the shaman's intention in order to avoid low-level spirits. Again, intention is mention as a fundamental part of what makes a shaman authentic. He believed in team job to gain potential clients' trust in his healing philosophy and techniques. He explained that calling on animals for healing work is just tapping into metaphors in the image of power animals (specific functions). He cared much about the human factor and comfort so people can heal properly. These are just examples of how the mix works for his clients. He focused on constancy, quality, and longevity.

He noticed that many shamans' system of belief perceives things coming from outside instead of inside. This is a critique of some forms of shamanism that need to be considered when trying to establish the family resemblance model. Besides this, colonial residual of resentment and worry caused a mentality of duality (e.g., good vs. evil) in

many people that came to the lodge. It is interesting to see how he interpreted duality experienced during shamanic practices from colonial theory. He prefers people to find them with little advertisement. That is why he charges according to the quality and attention that he offers at Refugio, founded in 1992. Neo-shamans like him actually care about people. One problem that is evident in these interviews is that shamanism in general lacks an ethical code that should be established in the general shamans' convention, but the problem is that it is difficult to make all agree, especially when they are more focused on money and women matters. He reckons there is competition, but he is fine about that. He believes that all religions came originally from shamanism and the so-called founders were shamans and healers. This is an interesting perception since it backs up the universal idea of core shamanism. According to him, the problem is that religions were created out of them and that because of the breakup of the religious systems, a lot of people lost the meaning of their lives and went back to find the origins in shamanism. This may explain why neo-shamanism became a trend in achieving transcendence and transformation. He died in December 2013 in suspicious circumstances.

Carlos Tanner

Carlos Tanner, a native of Massachusetts, is an apprentice to Don Juan Tangoa Paima in Iquitos (pp. 127-138). Both created Ayahuayra Wind Spirit Center for Healing for Western Students. Carlos used to smoke marihuana but didn't have a sacred attitude to it. His motivation to go deeper into the world of medicine plants was with *Salvia divinorum* until he finally found ayahuasca. He stated that he studied world religions in college but was unsatisfied about the lack of mystical experience from which they were

based: “a mystical experience started them, but none of the followers could then have that mystical experience” (p. 128). Carlos’ lived experience is also backing up the idea that neo-shamanism does help achieve transcendence and transformation because it integrates elements from core shamanism and Western metaphysics. The first time he witnessed a ceremony, Juan told him he had the potential to become a healer. The neo-shamans of this section share something in a particular which is the fact that another shaman legitimizes their job. This is an important aspect when it comes to the authority needed for neo-shamans to become shamans. He started a six-month apprenticeship and one-year diet of no sex. He believes in respecting the traditions and the rituals and helping the community out. He always tries to balance out the business of shamanism and healing. He thinks healing with ayahuasca is not for everyone so prospective seekers must undergo an initiation program to test the waters. Healing takes time, effort, and sacrifice. He stated that ayahuasca tourism is growing in Iquitos. He is ok with that, but he is against using ayahuasca as a recreational kind of drug. It is important to notice that ayahuasca used as a recreational drug is profane and may not be served as a way to achieving transcendence and transformation. He does see a strong Western influence on ayahuasca rituals. He says that are tribes studying *curanderismo* from Americans. This is an irony, but it makes neo-shamanism more authoritative that traditional shamanism in this case. He says that Westerners are bridging the gap to make sure that “the spirit and the essence of curanderismo does not die out” (p. 134). He believes the Western world needs it because there are a lot of spiritually sick people. This is one of the reasons neo-shamanism needs to be classified as a new kind of religion following the family resemblance model. He will be the next *curandero* after Juan passes away. This “scenario

echoes back to the role of traditional shaman who passed his knowledge down to his own lineage" (p. 135). Again, a shaman is passing his authority to a neo-shaman legitimizing his job. The definition of family changes for he considers Juan like his Peruvian father. He doesn't think he has achieved the status of a great healer, but people outside of the family sees him as a *curandero* and trusts him, maybe because he is a White person who guarantees he is a powerful person. Besides this, he states that people seem to have a high regard for the West and its material and mental power (his college background makes him learn very fast and understand very deep concepts). He thinks he will be a messenger of this philosophy when he goes back to the States.

Ron Wheelock

Ron Wheelock, a Baptist raised from the Midwest in the United States, was trained with *curanderos* in Iquitos (pp. 139-160). He knew about the medicine plants with Carlos Castañeda's books until he finally met ayahuasca and got a calling to become a healer. He is another example of how a person may have a calling from the spiritual world no matter if he/she comes from the Western world. The spirit of ayahuasca told him that she knew him before his birth and brought him to the rainforest to teach him. This backs up the idea that legitimization comes from the spiritual world first. He believes the brew is not just a chemical concoction but alchemy since you mix alkaloids from various plants (5-MEO-DMT and N-N-DMT) and the fifth element which is energy. This could be used as a metaphysical and Western explanation from a neo-shamanic perspective. That's the reason why the ceremonies include clearing and cleansing the instruments and the space. He says that there are as many as twelve or fifteen varieties of ayahuasca, each one with its own properties. He also added from his Western knowledge

to the *curanderismo* he learned. He believes "all cultures have something to offer" (p. 143). He has brought ayahuasca to the United States and to the White House as well. He thinks ayahuasca is becoming global and is trying to embrace the world. It seems that the spirit of ayahuasca or better, the spirit molecule, wants to expand beyond the Amazonian jungles and use neo-shamans for this purpose.

He trusts ayahuasca to bring his clients as long as he diets. He says it is like being married with ayahuasca. One day he would like to do some extractions of 5-MEO-DMT and N-N-DMT to see if the experiences still hold true. One of the reasons he drinks ayahuasca is for his health since he doesn't want to die young. He said he received a healing on his liver one time with ayahuasca. It was a long process. He explained that the more songs he learned, the more energy he had to do the healings. He says we are "caretakers of the Earth" (p. 155) and the plants are choosing the caretakers. It seems that it is the plants that are causing neo-shamanism to arise. He also argues that ayahuasca changes your DNA. He also told that he died once on ayahuasca since "part of a shaman's work is traveling to the other side to bring knowledge back her" (p. 160). It seems that dying symbolically during a shamanic experience may legitimize the future shaman in his/her role.

B. Jose Campos' *The Shaman and Ayahuasca*

Geraldine Overtone edited and compiled recorded interviews and conversations in September 2009 with curandero Don Jose Campos, along with Michael Wiese and Alberto Roman who journeyed to the Peruvian Amazonas to get a closer glimpse of what *curanderismo* is for the Western word. In addition to the book, Michael produced a film

called The Shaman and Ayahuasca that received the Best Documentary Film at the Albuquerque Film Festival.

In the introduction, Professor Charles Grob explains that the concoction called ayahuasca is a perfect formula that combines DMT from chacruna (*Psychotria viridis*) and harmala alkaloids, from a plant called ayahuasca (*Banisteriopsis caapi*), which inhibits the monoamine oxidase found in the gut allowing the DMT to be absorbed by the body. Don Jose states that "the Ayahuasca is what produces the dizziness, and the chacruna produces the visions" (p. 37) and only two varieties of chacruna out of two hundred work with Ayahuasca. By chewing the plant, the *curandero* knows it's Ayahuasca.

Ayahuasca is not only the name of the concoction, but also the name of one of the ingredients. For Grob, this is an unusual combination known by indigenous people for hundreds of years, a total mystery. Don Juan believes that ancient *curanderos* discovered ayahuasca by experience, since they saw jaguars in trance when they ate the leaves. Because of this, they did the same until they found the right dosage for healing processes. Ayahuasca is quechua for "vine of the Devil" or "vine of the soul". Don Jose explains that Spaniards didn't understand that the jungle spirits were neutral entities and ended up *satanizing* ayahuasca. That is why Don Jose explains that you can also become a dark witch (*hechicero*) by using the same plants. Even mainstream religions consider shamanism a satanic practice. For Jose, ayahuasca has expanded his consciousness of creativity and has made him a better human being and of service to himself and to others. This is another testimony of how ayahuasca used as a sacred plant does help in achieving transcendence and transformation. It even turns you into a wiser person. Don Jose calls it

spirituality: “for me is what you live day by day, day by day in every aspect of your life” (p. 125). It is to live fully and at peace. This meaning of spiritually could be used as an important element for constructing the definition of neo-shamanism.

Don Jose states that the word shamanism doesn’t exist in the Amazon, but the word *vegetalista* or *curandero* (the person who does healing with plants). A plant has a spirit or force called *mariri*. The icaros or songs are used to call upon the *mariri* and that of animals as well. One characteristic of a shaman is that he has the power to invoke those energies for the healing process. Another is the intention that you pass on to those who need the healing. Away to become a *vegetalista* or *curandero* is “by experimenting or by transmission from ancestors” (p. 5). In his case, he inherited it. It’s in his blood. Don Jose believes that we not only heal ourselves but our ancestors and beloved.

Pablo Amaringo is another shaman who was a very close friend of Don Jose. He stated that “Ayahuasca will reveal to you all the matters of the spirit. Everything has a spirit, a spirit for a song, a spirit for a poem” (p 53).

Michael and his team decided to drink ayahuasca to experience the power of the concoction. The healing takes place in a ceremony that is actually a purge since you throw up your illness. The brew makes you dizzy since it is the way to start the purge. The shaman is important because he opens up the place where people can feel at ease. Not only is the set and setting extremely important, but also the shaman’s intention. When you drink Ayahuasca, you drink the spirit of the plants and enter the world of the spirit. Once you drink it, it will be with you forever. Alberto, who was part of the team, stated that ayahuasca communed with people and that there are even experiences with divine aliens. Michael had a vision in which he realized that all humans are divine

children. We see that experiences with ayahuasca as the sacred do help people achieve transcendence.

For Don Jose, *curanderismo* is totally free and shouldn't be considered religious, except for the practice it involves since it is taken in a group setting in which there is mutual support and acceptance since everybody goes through the purge. The family resemblance model definition may suggest that neo-shamanism can be classified as a religion even though it is a more metaphysical experience, in other words, it cannot be approached by solely objective studies of material reality, but by including philosophical concepts and ideas. He admits that ayahuasca has expanded his consciousness at various level, and even taught him how to choose his friends. However, he reckons that ayahuasca "always gives you what you need at the time" (p. 13). Everyone has his/her own experience. He tells a story of someone who was healed from a snake bite and says "it's effective. It's a kind of science. It's more a science of the lived" (p. 19). This is a good example of a lived experience that supports the idea of drinking ayahuasca for transformation. He does believe in a Creator who made it and says that we live in a garden full of mysteries and that illnesses are a mystery too.

He states that *curanderismo* is the moving of energies, those from the plants, from the patients and from the shamans. This definition may serve a as a way to re-define neo-shamanism. The icaros work as tools that lead the *curandero* in the healing process. It is like the language of the spirits of the plants. He believes that "the qualities that make a good shaman are compassion, self-assurance, peacefulness, trustworthiness, and humility" (p. 33). This is useful for trying to define what makes an authentic shaman. He also uses tobacco in his ceremonies since it's a protector spirit.

Julio, from the faculty of Pharmacy and Biochemistry at the National University of Peru, was interviewed in regard to ayahuasca tourism. He argued that the so-called shamans from North America simply do business with it, since they usually resist the purge (vomiting and diarrhea), lack the discipline it involves and are ignorant of the ancient concept of healing. It is merely exploitation for him. He even says that a real shaman is one who not only has knowledge of the plant world but also the ability to calm down people that are going through a very difficult trance. What Julio argues is very important to keep in mind since the sacredness of ayahuasca in neo-shamanism should be viewed from the concept of core shamanism. He even says that ayahuasca confronts people with death and that "there is a deep spiritual intertwining between Amazonian indigenous groups and the culture of people from India and Asia who practice Buddhism" (p. 78). Entheogenic drugs are good for the existential anguish and useful for achieving transcendence and transformation.

Before drinking ayahuasca, it is imperative to follow a special diet (*dieta*). It consists of sexual abstinence and restrictions on certain foods such as salt, sweets, certain meats and some fruits and vegetables. The reason behind this diet is because people are ingesting the spirit of the plant that has some demands for the healing to take place. *Dieta* is one of the fundamental elements of core shamanism, however, it seems that this element is lacking in many modern forms of shamanism. Should *dieta* be included as a fundamental element in neo-shamanism or may the spirit molecule change the traditional way and make the *dieta* optional for practitioners?

C. Raz Degan's *The Last Shaman*

This documentary is about James Freeman, a guy in his twenties from the Boston area, who developed a severe depression disorder. He stated that he tried hard to cope with his parents and college demands to be successful but couldn't do it. He stated that he wanted to love and be loved. He felt he was in an emotionless state with no motivations at all. He received different kinds of therapy and medications at the hospital including electro shocks. Nothing worked and he gave himself ten months to find an alternative cure, otherwise, he would consider killing himself. He knew about ayahuasca on a National Geographic documentary. Even though he was skeptical, he decided to go to Iquitos, Peru, to give it a try. While he was looking for a healer, he noticed that ayahuasca was a big business there.

James is a good example of a Western person that is truly looking for healing in traditional shamanism. Illness seems to be a motivating factor for achieving transcendence and transformation which is a common trend among those who became shamans.

He met Guillermo, a traditional shaman, that stated that ayahuasca is a way to discover an illness among other things. James didn't drink ayahuasca with him because he was still on medication but witnessed a ceremony. Unfortunately, one of the attendees passed away during the ceremony. Guillermo said that the guy was not ready for ayahuasca, but the person insisted on drinking it. This was shocking for James, so he decided to look for someone else. There have been cases of people dying from ayahuasca that may be related to negligence of people that don't see it as a sacred plant and do not

follow the shaman's guidance. Fisher and Rinehart (2017) pointed out the important role of the shaman as a mystical intermediary.

James met a "gringo" shaman called Ron that used to be a drug addict, an alcoholic, and a school dropout. This is an atypical kind of neo-shaman which shows how any person can become one. He is a fight rooster who considers himself a spiritual warrior. Ron has got an authority in such a way that there have been professors who have come to Iquitos to learn from this ex-con. Ironically, Ron has a stock of ayahuasca bottles worth 250,000 dollars. He says that many *ayahuasqueros* are more interested in the business than in helping people to get healed. The true healers are hard to find and they don't charge. Ron implies he is not as good as other healers. What makes a true healer from Ron's perspective?

Ron had James go through a cleansing process before taking ayahuasca through a special diet (*dieta*). This neo-shaman explains that Westerners always look for the miracle pill that can solve all the problems, but with natural medicines, that doesn't happen. It is a combination of everything working together that does the healing. It seems that core shamanism is looking for healing as the main goal.

Back home, James' parents are intrigued about their son. James' father stated that psychiatrists don't have a real understanding of how the brain works according to a famous researcher. He is hopeful that ayahuasca may help his son. He did confess that he wanted his son to be a successful person according to Western standards. At the end, James' mother will acknowledge James' courage. James is a good example of how a Western person may achieve transcendence and transformation by drinking ayahuasca.

On the day of the ceremony, Ron prays to the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. He does what a traditional shaman would do like blowing the tools and singing icaros. The purge starts, and James recalls things he had forgotten about. He felt self-love and realized that what society had taught him about love was wrong. This is evidence of how the brew is useful for transcendence.

James had to look for another healer since Ron couldn't continue with his training because he was planning to buy a piece of land to build his own ceremonial site. James went to the Shipibo community where he met Pepe, a shaman that was appointed by the spirit of ayahuasca to become a shaman, who stated that he was very sick too when he was dieting. This is another case of someone who got a calling in the middle of illness.

James was asked to wash himself with water and leaves to get energized. He didn't judge it. Pepe stated that James got a good insight. According to Pepe, it is the plants who approach him to make the brew. During the ceremony at the *maloka* (ceremonial hut), Pepe smokes tobacco on a pipe and sings icaros that transfer the healing. After the ceremony, James feels more enthusiastic about himself.

One day, James notices that some of Guillermo's apprentices from an NGO are building a center to train Westerners to become shamans. For James, it is strange to see Guillermo again after the death episode. Pepe believes that this project is going to create jealousy and money issues among shamans. For James, this ayahuasca business is very stressful. Davidov (2010) stated that the emergence of shamanism as a lucrative profession may challenge current categorization of shamans and may create new categories. The NGO project will cause radical changes in the traditional shamanic practices of this place.

James followed a four-month *dieta* with tobacco, rice, fish, and five different plants. It was very intense, and he had many visions and revelations. He says that the plants are extremely powerful. He recalls that once the spirit of a plant did a kind of surgery on him. He states that he doesn't have an inferiority complex anymore. He feels no anger towards his father, and he has no attachment to his previous way of life. He even had a vision with the spirit of ayahuasca that told him that he was going to be born again. When the *dieta* period was over, he was buried on the ground symbolically with just his nose out and seven hours later, he was unburied. This is an extraordinary example of transcendence and transformation. He seems happy and believes Pepe is a very authentic person and a true healer. James stated that Pepe was humble, kind, and he invested in his care James is becoming much stronger. Are these characteristics that make a shaman a true shaman?

However, James got discouraged because Pepe was kicked out of the village by the NGO people because he was accused of conducting private ceremonies for the tourists. It seems that the business factor plays an important role in re-defining traditional shamanism. Stuckrad (2005) stated that there was a revival of shamanism. Business can be a factor for such revival.

Pepe feels very disappointed about this situation. James doesn't know where Pepe went. He misses him so much and feels alone now. Pepe goes to another city where he witnesses how ayahuasca is sold like an alcoholic beverage at the bars. He states that the essence of the plants is being lost. This is what Eliade referred as the profane. The sacredness of the plant is lost since the plant becomes an ordinary object.

James decides to go back home and states that Pepe is the last shaman he'll work with. For him, a shaman is someone who looks at the world and doesn't see matter devoid of spirit. This is a central idea of core shamanism. He sees live in everything. He sees an intelligence that weaves its way through our body, the rocks, the trees, the sky, and the entire cosmos. He wants to go back home to integrate and make amends. He states that he is a small part of something larger and that is extremely liberating. He has found a place of peace inside that he can hold to so that everything else comes back. He even says that ayahuasca is not to be worshipped. She won't give you anything that already is inside of you. He has now the key to himself in order to get well. He's doing all right. He wasn't totally cured but came back with a will to live. He may like to help others in the future. His lived experience is a testimony of how using ayahuasca as a sacred plant does help a person achieve transcendence and transformation. Interestingly, for Pepe, James could have become a great shaman. Is James a prototype of what a neo-shaman should be like?

Chapter V.

Conclusions

After the analysis, it is time to answer the research questions. First, how different is neo-shamanism from traditional shamanism for achieving transcendence and transformation? Neo-shamanism is a modern spiritual practice that draws inspiration from traditional shamanism, but it is not necessarily the same as traditional shamanism. Neo-shamanism is typically practiced in contemporary Western societies and often combines elements of various spiritual traditions.

One key difference between neo-shamanism and traditional shamanism is the context in which they are practiced. Traditional shamanism is often deeply rooted in specific cultures and communities, and its practices are shaped by the beliefs, customs, and experiences of those communities. Neo-shamanism, on the other hand, is often practiced by individuals or small groups who may not have a direct connection to a specific cultural tradition.

Another difference is that traditional shamanism often involves the use of specific rituals, practices, and tools that have been passed down through generations. These practices are often highly structured and are designed to enable the shaman to enter into altered states of consciousness in order to communicate with spirits, ancestors, and other non-human entities. In contrast, neo-shamanism often encourages individuals to develop their own unique practices and to explore a wide range of spiritual tools and techniques, such as guided visualizations, drumming, or meditation.

Both traditional shamanism and neo-shamanism may be used to achieve transcendence and transformation, but the specific methods and practices used may differ. Traditional shamanism often focuses on the shaman's relationship with the spirits and the natural world, while neo-shamanism may focus more on personal growth and self-discovery. Ultimately, the effectiveness of either approach will depend on the individual's own beliefs, experiences, and intentions.

Both forms of shamanism may lead to transcendence and transformation if the basic tenets of core shamanism are kept in mind. These are: the brew seen as a sacred element, the spiritual world seen as the guiding authority, and the intention of the user as a way for his/her own transcendence and transformation. The only difference is that neo-shamanism combines core shamanism with the Western factor that includes various metaphysical (philosophical) and religious perceptions, eclectic techniques that suit a more heterogenous group, and the legitimization of a Western shaman by both the spiritual world and another shaman.

Second, how is the sacred (the wholly different order) and the profane (the physical world) perceived from the perspectives and lived experiences of both shamans and neo-shamans? In traditional shamanism, the sacred and the profane are often seen as interrelated and interdependent aspects of reality. The shaman may see the natural world and physical reality as infused with spiritual energy and meaning and may use ritual and ceremony to connect with and honor the sacred in everyday life. For the shaman, the profane is not necessarily a negative or inferior aspect of reality, but rather a necessary complement to the sacred.

In neo-shamanism, there may be a similar recognition of the interrelatedness of the sacred and the profane, but the specific perceptions and experiences may vary. Some neo-shamans may view the physical world as an illusion or a temporary manifestation of a deeper spiritual reality, while others may view the physical world as a sacred expression of the divine.

Both shamans and neo-shamans may seek to connect with the sacred through practices such as meditation, prayer, ritual, and ceremony. However, the specific practices and beliefs may differ. For example, a traditional shaman may perform a ritual to honor the spirits of nature, while a neo-shaman may use guided visualization to connect with a personal spirit guide.

Overall, while there may be some differences in the ways that shamans and neo-shamans perceive and experience the sacred and the profane, both traditions share a recognition of the importance of spiritual connection and the interconnectedness of all things.

Both kinds of shamans agree on the fact that the spiritual world is the highest authority and only the spirits will decide what should be sacred and what should be profane. However, since the spirit world is a mystery, there might be conflicting revelations on these issues. It is the shaman who is responsible to get to common grounds with other shamans on resolve these issues.

Third, how different is the role of the shaman from the perspectives and lived experiences of both shamans and neo-shamans? The role of the shaman in traditional shamanism is often multifaceted and may vary depending on the culture and community

in which the shaman operates. In general, the shaman is seen as a mediator between the human and spirit worlds, and is often called upon to facilitate healing, provide spiritual guidance, and perform various other functions for the community.

In traditional shamanic societies, the shaman may hold a position of high status and respect and may be consulted on a wide range of matters related to spiritual and physical well-being. The shaman may also be responsible for preserving and passing down traditional knowledge and practices.

In neo-shamanism, the role of the shaman may be somewhat different. While neo-shamans may also see themselves as mediators between the human and spirit worlds, they may not necessarily operate within a specific cultural or community context. Instead, they may see themselves as individuals who are developing their own spiritual practices and seeking personal transformation and growth.

In some cases, neo-shamans may also view the shamanic path as a form of personal empowerment, allowing them to tap into their own innate spiritual power and potential. However, there is also a recognition among many neo-shamans that the shamanic path requires a great deal of humility, respect, and dedication to the spiritual forces at work.

Overall, while the role of the shaman may differ somewhat between traditional shamanism and neo-shamanism, both traditions share a recognition of the importance of spiritual connection, healing, and personal transformation. The shaman is seen as a guide and facilitator on this path, helping individuals to navigate the complexities of the human and spirit worlds and to cultivate a deeper understanding of the sacred nature of reality.

Both shamans rely on the spirits to make up decisions, however, since neo-shamans include Western though and practices, neo-shamans' decisions on how to proceed with people may not be acceptable by certain traditional shamans.

Neo-shamanism is a revival from traditional shamanism (Stuckrad, 2005) that has been caused by entheogenic tourism as a factor of change. Neo-shamanism is a new lifeway that needs to be classified as a new religious practice according to the family resemblance model (Dawson & Thiessen, 2016). The neo-shaman remains a mystical intermediary (Fisher and Rinehart, 2017) with the difference that you can become your own shaman if the spiritual world allows it. As long as the ayahuasca brew that contains DMT or the spirit molecule is used in a sacred way, anyone can benefit from it and achieve transcendence and transformation beyond the jungles and mountains from where the plants were originally from.

Defining neo-shamanism implies re-defining traditional shamanism. If there is not a consensual definition of shamanism and neo-shamanism, what elements or characteristics should a shaman have to legitimize his/her job among the new forms of shamanism today? The legitimacy of an individual's practice may vary depending on cultural and community contexts. However, there are some general elements or characteristics that are often associated with shamanic practice and may help to legitimize an individual's work in the field.

First and foremost, a shaman should have a deep and respectful relationship with the spiritual forces at work in the world. This may involve developing a strong connection to nature, honoring the spirits of ancestors and the land, and cultivating a sense of humility and openness to the guidance of the divine.

Additionally, a shaman should have a clear understanding of the methods and practices of shamanic journeying, including the ability to enter into altered states of consciousness and communicate with spirits and other non-human entities. This may involve developing a variety of shamanic tools and techniques, such as drumming, chanting, visualization, or the use of plant medicines.

In order to legitimize their work, a shaman should also have a clear code of ethics and a commitment to serving others in a responsible and respectful manner. This may involve seeking appropriate training and guidance from experienced teachers, honoring cultural and spiritual traditions, and respecting the boundaries and needs of clients or community members.

Overall, the legitimacy of a shaman's work will depend on a variety of factors, including their relationship to the spiritual forces at work in the world, their mastery of shamanic techniques and practices, and their commitment to serving others with integrity and respect. While there may not be a single definition of shamanism or neo-shamanism that is universally accepted, these elements can help to guide the practice and ensure that it is grounded in a deep and meaningful spiritual connection.

Finally, if there are positive shared perceptions on the true nature of neo-shamanic practices, is it possible that these can be counted as strong evidence for making neo-shamanism as legal and meaningful as traditional shamanic practices within the United States? The legality of shamanic or neo-shamanic practices within the United States is determined by a variety of factors, including federal and state laws, as well as cultural and social attitudes towards spirituality and alternative healing practices. While positive shared perceptions of neo-shamanic practices may be indicative of their value and

legitimacy, it is unlikely that these perceptions alone would be sufficient to establish them as legal or meaningful on the same level as traditional shamanic practices.

In order to gain legal recognition and acceptance, neo-shamanic practices would need to navigate a complex legal and cultural landscape, which may involve addressing issues such as intellectual property rights, cultural appropriation, and ethical concerns related to the use of plant medicines or other shamanic techniques. Additionally, the specific legal requirements for practicing shamanism or neo-shamanism may vary depending on the state or jurisdiction and may be subject to change over time.

The legitimacy of shamanic or neo-shamanic practices within the United States will depend on a variety of factors, including legal and cultural norms, public perception, and the willingness of individuals and communities to embrace these practices as valid and meaningful forms of spiritual and healing work. While positive shared perceptions of neo-shamanic practices may be an important factor in this process, they are unlikely to be the sole determining factor.

Future work should include the study of lived experiences of other shamans and neo-shamans that use entheogens containing DMT in other areas in South, Central and North America, and even in other continents.

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