

Translate from French¹ by Kenneth A. Symington. English version published by Takiwasi Center in its Website.

In a mission to Peru, medical doctor Jacques Mabit discovers shamanic medicine. Impressed by the expertise of indigenous peoples on the subject of plants, he asks to be initiated. Today, he manages a Center in the Amazon with the help of shamans; he heals drug addicts with the use of a psychoactive preparation. It is not a substitute for a conventional medicine, but a tool of another type of medicine.

My experience in Peru during three years (1980-1983), as part of the "Doctors without Frontiers" program, convinced me of one thing: the healers know how to treat cases resistant to conventional medicine. My return to France reminded me of our relative powerlessness, especially in the areas of psychopathology and drug addiction, I then made the decision to more closely explore these therapeutic procedures, within the structure of a research project in medical anthropology. The discourse of shamans and healers soon revealed itself to be a difficult hurdle. "Who teaches you? --The plants, how do they teach you their knowledge? -- By means of dreams or through altered states of consciousness produced by ritual ingestion of psychotropic, non-addictive vegetable substances." Is it possible that all this is true, in a controlled environment, subject to verification? Conversations with healers invariably ended with the question: "And I, a Western doctor, can I learn as well? ---Yes, the plants can teach you as well, if you love and respect them and ingest them strictly following the rules (diets, fasts, isolation in the forest, sexual abstinence, etc.) They will then come to you and speak to you; it is the only way to learn".

THE HEALERS WERE RIGHT

This strange conversation put me in a dilemma: I would have to abandon my intent to understand, or else forge ahead and humbly accept self-experimentation. Certain good reasons to do so became evident, particularly the agreement between empirical approaches and the criteria of modern science. Autochthonous "science" in effect also depends upon observable facts and presents a rigorous methodology, clearly defines the conditions necessary for self-experimentation and transmission of facts, and also demands concrete results. We decided, a young ethno botanist and I, to proceed to the very limits of the experience, and to test the assertions of the healers in our own bodies.

There is no point in making detailed descriptions of 5 years of apprenticeship, demanding, difficult, but so very enriching. The healers spoke the truth. Plants do teach. To the point where we became capable of mastering the preparation and usage of vegetable potions, mastering the sacred chants, leading therapeutic stances.

Initiation involved a passage through altered states of consciousness, without creating addiction or dependence. It was an echo of the savage "counter-initiations" of drug addicts.

Some patients came forth as a result of the association of doctor and healer. In spite of limited means, the results encouraged us to pursue and gradually to formulate an alternative therapy, associating this traditional wisdom to modern psychotherapeutic techniques.

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AN ANCESTRAL, UNUSED WISDOM

Known as the foremost producer of coca, Peru is also a consuming country. The most prevalent product used is cocaine basic paste (“crack”). Dependence comes quickly and very soon pushes the consumer to a marginal existence. The demand on means to support the addiction is huge. But the number of treatment centers is minimal. Furthermore, these centers are concentrated in the capital city.

Outside of the cities, the indigenous healers demonstrate an amazing capacity to adapt to these new pathologies. In each region, techniques have been developed which are based on one or several psychotropic substances (cactus with mescaline, vines, etc...) On the coast, Peruvian psychiatrists have proven the efficacy of empirical therapies using mescaline-containing cacti in the treatment of alcoholics.

The Peruvian Ministry of Health, aware of the enormous potential of this ancient wisdom, subsidizes an Institute of Traditional Medicines. France participates in this research through a French Institute of Andean Studies. Our activity is based upon those initiatives. Within that concept, we have created in Tarapoto, in the Amazonian foothills of Peru, with our Peruvian partners, a treatment Center for drug addicts. Patients volunteer their participation. The actual goal of the institution is to set up a structure capable of permanently lodging 15 patients. In view of our limited means, patients are invited, depending upon their condition and abilities, to participate in work which contributes to the Center's self-sufficiency (crafts, teaching, horticulture, construction,...) The treatment protocol which emerged from our experience, blends traditional medicine and modern psychotherapeutic techniques. It consists of 2 phases: a brief physical disintoxication using plant purgatives (10 days), designed to shorten and diminish withdrawal syndromes, followed by a longer second phase (6-12 months) of “psychic” disintoxication. This second phase includes periodic ingestion of psychotropic plant substances.

JOURNEYS TO THE “OTHER WORLD”

The patient participating in this therapeutic process experiences rebirth of an inner universe, which manifests through dreams, visions, flashbacks during ordinary consciousness, sudden intuitions. A return from chaos gradually takes place, where the subject recovers his identity and is encouraged to eject anything which doesn't belong to him not only the poisons coming from the consumption of toxins, but also psychic or emotional “infestations” contaminating the Self. The function of psychotropic plants is to allow a visualization of this process by the patient himself, who is therefore re-taught by the internal mechanisms which animate him. Contrary to the “counter-initiation” of drug addicts, this process responds by the re-establishment of an inner order, thanks to the pathways of shamanic initiation. The essential element of initiation practices in the Upper Amazon is ayahuasca. This “Vine of the Dead”, prepared as a potion, opens the door to a relationship with the “other world”. After exploring its effects on ourselves over the course of more than 350 ritual sessions, and having learned how to manage it, we have made it the central axis of our proposed treatment.

During evening sessions, we proceed to the induction of a controlled modification of the state of consciousness of the participants. The psychotropic effects of the potion provoke a general amplification of perceptions, an acceleration of mental functions, and a relative inhibition of rational defenses, without losing consciousness or elements of the internal dynamics of each subject, who is led to view that which dwells within him. The crises which arise, the revealed conflicts, the hidden fears, are all resolved by exteriorization, with simultaneous expulsion of “poisons”, physical, psychic, metaphysical. Catharsis includes generally potent evacuations (vomit, diarrhea, sweat...) and spiritual battles visualized as encounters between angels and demons. After the curative energy of ayahuasca has cleaned out the different terrains, the subject enters a peaceful stage involving global reconciliation with his body, his ego, and the surrounding universe. During the course of exploring his inner universe, ayahuasca helps the patient discern his own aptitudes, his qualities, in short, his vocation.

The subject discovers what it is he carries within, his just and legitimate place in existence, he recognizes a goal and a path. Ayahuasca moves on. It relinquishes space after playing its role. Our experience leads us to think that with a 6 month long treatment and around 20 sessions, a drug addict

can be given a sufficient foundation to allow the finding of a path to follow in the future.

Ayahuasca does not entail addiction; it is totally assimilated. This is what fundamentally separates it from other drugs. The concept of substitution is therefore totally foreign to the method we have adopted. If there is a substitution, it would only be that of an orderly and controlled practice of ingestion of other plants having similar psychotropic effects, instead of the savage habit of taking mind altering substances. From our point of view, the substitution of one addictive substance by another, even if the latter is a legal one and mellowed by medical prescription, reflects nothing but a therapeutic inability to respond to the basic problem at hand. The use of methadone, for example, is part of a scheme of medical repression. It's a cover-up, a robe, perhaps elegant with hospital colors, but in reality a barbarous practice. To our eyes, drug addiction demonstrates an attempt, almost always unconscious, to break through the barriers of an individual universe. It is equivalent to an intrusion beyond the limits of ordinary consciousness which, imprison the subject within a too restrictive space, where he cannot find a satisfactory answer to his existential restlessness. Drug addiction manifests a profound aspiration to the restitution of a purpose to existence.

It has been found, then, that empirical traditional medicines precisely offer a complex set of wisdoms, which pretend to give an answer to this problem. Amazonian shamanic practices appear capable of dealing with contemporary drug addictions. They have the enormous advantage of not negating the underlying quest upon which drug rests, but on the contrary, to identify it, to recognize what is well-founded, and finally to offer a methodology expert in the use of non-ordinary states of consciousness.