

# Shamanic Perception: The Couch of Two Minds

by Gay Wolff

dead matter. Sometimes it's the medicine moving through the body (or back out via regurgitation or the bowels) that seems to be doing most of the work and visions are then scarce. Other times, it's the visionary experience that gives the initiate a personal encounter with the spirit of ayahuasca; it might stimulate a profound celestial flight, a psychedelic journey through iridescent plant, animal, or geometric realms, or deep journeys into the underworld of our fears and self-dissolution. For the *curanderos*, masters of plant medicine, whether an initiate has a vision is not important. The medicine spirit will always do what is most needed, and the shaman "tracks" the process, manages the energies of the ceremony, and holds a sacred space of protection for the participants. Though entheogenic plant medicine is only a aspect of the practices utilized by the Peruvian shamans of the Amazon, it is an important one. Regardless of the type of experience, once ayahuasca is inside us, we are inside it, and there is no longer any doubt that the spirit of ayahuasca is consciously choosing its work. Nor is it easy to doubt that the shamans are in direct communication with it and other spirits. To experience ayahuasca ceremonially is to step into the realm of archetype—angels and daemons.

Rebecca R. Stone is the author of *The Jaguar Within* and is the force behind Emory's Michael C. Carlos Museum's current visionary art exhibit, which is heavily dedicated to the shaman's place and role during visionary ceremony. Ceremonial vessels are decorated with symbols of visionary flight, and the creatures indicative of the shaman's power animal natures. Of particular use is the jaguar, which in the Peruvian shamanic culture often represents that capacity to function in the visionary world: to walk in the shadowy dimensions with courage, tracking keenly and predatorily, and taking on whatever needs mulching and doing the work to bring that jungle realm of the soul back into balance.

Stone says that since, for the ancients, both the visionary and ordinary realms are real, their visionary art treats the images of all realms in similar terms artistically, through concrete images. Thus, she suggests that if "the visionary realms are deemed as real as the terrestrial, then the apparent paradox of a person who is both Here and on the Other Side—experiencing dual consciousness—can be bridged" (16). One piece on exhibit strikes me as a powerful metaphor for tenders of the soul: It depicts a female shaman sitting on the back of a two-headed caiman, one head at each end. The shaman's role in ceremony is to be of two minds, the conscious and the visionary. To lean too far to either extreme will place one in danger. She must straddle the minds in order not to be caught in the crocodilian teeth and swallowed, thus lose the shamanic perspective which allows for engagement of the mythic realms without losing power in the middle world, ordinary realm. Jung describes in "Splitting of the Spirit" from *The Red Book* a vision that echoes the danger:

On this desert path there is not just glowing sand, but also horrible tangled invisible beings who live in the desert. I



Don Huntley, Jade Guardian, Kauai, 2012

**T**hey call it the death vine, ayahuasca, but not because it is poisonous; on the contrary, it is also considered the good doctor, good medicine, *bonito médico*. Rather, the ultimate ayahuasca experience will and does bring one to the point of unmaking: physically, emotionally, paradigmatically, and egoically. To follow ayahuasca—into the domain of sensations, sound, geometrics, and visions that seem driven to completely tear away the concretized certainties that have guided our lives—is to go on the great journey. For many, it culminates in seeing their bodies dismembered, dissolved, or otherwise destroyed and then reconstituted—thus making the initiate a "twice-born" individual who can move beyond their primary fears, including death. As the major arcana of the Tarot tells us, we all begin the journey as the unsuspecting fool, and must at some point surrender to a dying in order to eventually gain the world as a new self; as is likewise reflected in Joseph Campbell's hero's journey, Jung's individuation, and the Shaman's initiation. The path to something more requires a dying of what is, and in the Amazon, that path often includes plant medicines that work the cells and synapses of the body, as well as the ideas and emotions of the psyche.

The traditional ayahuasca experience is a ceremony—a healing ritual with far more than cinematic visions as its primary function. It is particularly critical to healing and initiatory shifts because it targets the dead matter of our mind and body and forces us to see its toxic, deadly, or deadening effects, then drives us toward a release, dissolution, or annihilation of the

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**Gay Wolff** is a Ph.D. candidate in the Myth with Depth Psychology program at Pacifica Graduate Institute. She also studies energy medicine and shamanistic healing, and is writing her dissertation on the role that the imaginal capacity plays in healing, focusing on soul loss and soul retrieval. Email: [gaywolff@sagefoundations.com](mailto:gaywolff@sagefoundations.com)

didn't know this. The way is only apparently clear, the desert is only apparently empty. It seems inhabited by magical beings who murderously attach themselves to me and daimonically change my form. (240)

Thus, Ayahuasca takes us into places we fear, and the shaman keeps watch, protects, and guides. Shamans are able to access and bridge these worlds through journey (with and without entheogenic drugs) by using their imaginal capacities to find the axis mundi within themselves and ride it to the dimensions above and below. In his Black Book 5, Jung records his unleashed visionary imagination which reflects his personal discovery of this shamanic sensibility of reality:

My soul, where did you go? Did you go to the animals?  
I bind the Above with the Below. . . .

If I am not conjoined through the uniting of the Below and the Above, I break down into three parts: the serpent, and in that or some other animal form I roam, living forever within you. The celestial soul, as such dwelling with the Gods, far from you and unknown to you, appearing in the form of a bird. Each of these three parts then is independent. (*The Red Book Appendix C*, 370)

The serpent and bird images can also be found throughout shamanic visionary art representing the lower and upper realms respectively, as well as the properties those archetypes represent: the serpent sheds its skin for renewal, and the bird's gives perspective and connection to spirit. Similar to Jung's theories, *ayahuasqueros* of Peru also understand that each Soul is on a journey toward maturity and wholeness that is often directed by compensatory influences of the divine (those within us and without). Shamans understand this power to be conscious and are masters of techniques in orchestrating safe and appropriate direct encounters with these subtle forces. They have been engaging, mapping, and sharing the wisdom of this intermediary plane for centuries, often understanding these forces through animal energies, and engaging those same energies to interact in this visionary domain. Once the gates are breached, it is imperative that the shaman can stand up to those forces with courage and strength, like the jaguar, and be able to adopt the strengths of other creatures, as well.

Westerners tend to think of psychedelic drugs as tools for escaping stress or reality, the way alcohol and other recreational drugs are frequently used. However, Stone points out that "Having visions of other realities is not synonymous with being unconscious (except with datura), being possessed, or losing all sense of self, but rather the opposite" (16). The authentic ayahuasca ceremony is not an escape, but is a journey into the intermediary realm where spirits/archetypal energies are real and ready to engage. Here shamans use smoke, song, and their highly developed perceptual states to observe and manage the spiritual ballet before them: a ballet of energies not only within the initiate, but energies interacting from beyond as well. Stone explains the multi-sensory and boundless nature of the visionary experience:

Since visions activate all the senses (and then some) but remain predominantly visual, the head—and by extension the eyes—best serve as the 'locus' of visions in the body. It is important to qualify this immediately: while in Western culture the idea may prevail that visions are 'all in the head, meaning they are perceptual illusions and visual

tricks of the imagination, brain chemistry, or psyche without reality value, a shamanic culture does not define or limit them as such. . . . Even if the shaman is believed to be Elsewhere, it remains true that her senses are engaged even more fully than they are Here, and they are not experienced as contained within a body. . . . (78)

A Quechua verb, *ikaray*, means to blow smoke for healing, and is quite literal with the Amazonian shamans, as they puff on a pipe or hand rolled cigarette and blow smoke vigorously into the room, circle. In addition to the smoke, they direct the visionary experience and energies with song, the *ikaros* (icaros), medicine songs that are sung or whistled.

With *ikaros*, shamans are singing to the plant spirit, according to the needs of the group. In one ceremony I was seated with my eyes closed exactly across the circle from the shaman and was gently rocking as the medicine was working through my body more than my mind, when he began a new song, and I suddenly felt it blast into my chest, knocking me backwards. I caught myself before falling over, but I felt his song moving through my body, humming into my chest, and then into my belly. At that point, I became ill and felt something let go within me as I vomited into my bucket. Though I had had profound visions in other ceremonies, this physical response to the *ikaros* was healing in its own way, and left me feeling I resonated in a high frequency by the end of the night.

In another ceremony, one with a female shaman named Adela, I was lying on a thatched mat in a rickety stilted hut feeling my mind flying through visionary snippets that I couldn't quite grasp. The shaman, curled in the corner was smoking her hand-rolled *mapachos*, blowing large amounts of smoke through the small space, while her son sang a gentle *ikaros* that calmed the mind and heart. I kept floating off into these random vignettes, trying to "concentrate" as Maestro Panduro had instructed. I found myself lost in the belly of the mother, as everything about the experience was making me feel swallowed up and bothered by the weight inside and all around me—a weight that seemed both pregnant with potential and suffocating. "Concentrate," I reminded myself.

Adela began singing again in a grating pitch that suddenly aroused my mind and that weightiness that had saturated my body. Not only did I regain clarity and the means to concentrate, but all around me I heard the signs of energy rising, as people began to move, talk, or vomit. She has reawakened the spirit of ayahuasca, and we were on the journey again. After exhaustion began to set in, she quieted, and her son's soft delicate voice drew us back into a place of peace. The medicine was coaxed into a calm again, and thus the ceremony ebbed and flowed for hours, at the will of the shaman.

A growing body of scientific research and personal accounts continue to support a return to understanding the universe as interconnected, interactive, interreflective, and intelligent. Quantum physics has shown that energetic building blocks of life are influenced by consciousness, and Jung certainly understood archetypes to have an independent energy and intelligence, responsive to active imagination as a means of engaging, digesting, and integrating those energies. Sound, as well as image, as we read in Massimilla Harris's spring article can help us to work with these dynamic forces. The shaman engages these images, but never without an awareness of the danger, and the need to stay centered on the double headed couch, if we truly wish to help people through the mythic journey.