

WHEN SACRED PLANTS TURN INTO RESOURCES.
REVIEW OF *CULL OF PERSONALITY:
AYAHUASCA, SHAMANISM AND THE DEATH
OF THE HEALER*, BY KEVIN TUCKER,
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Cull of Personality: Ayahuasca, Shamanism and the Death of the Healer tells a story of colonial encounters with different worlds, with a primary focus on the processes associated with turning human and non-human others into resources. Along with Christopher Columbus’ “discovery” of the New World and the signing of the Treaty at Tordesillas, which divided its territory between European empires, began the era of the exploitation of local people, plants, animals and minerals. The author of the book, like many other scholars, points out that despite the fall of imperial powers, Western domination is not just a part of a cruel past, but is still enacted in many material and immaterial forms: inter alia in Euro-American claims on indigenous knowledge. In the light of the “psychedelic renaissance” (known also as a psychedelic turn) and the globalization of entheogens¹, Kevin Tucker’s book offers a valuable approach to the phenomenon of the mainstreaming of psychedelic medicine plants. He reminds us that the history of *ayahuasca* is strictly intertwined with the history of colonialism, and that we should bear this in mind when engaging in practices connected with the Amazonian sacred brew. However, the author leaves no hope that Westerners may establish positive and sustainable relations with indigenous worlds, and postulates that they rather should stay away from them.

The starting point for Tucker’s reflection is the tragic death of Maestra Olivia, a plant medicine healer from the Shipibo-Conibo group. She was shot by Sebastian Woodroffe, a Canadian who was lynched afterwards by the local community as an act of revenge. The recording of this assassination spread across the Internet and became a matter of global interest. Woodroffe, like many Western travellers and spiritual seekers, came to the Peruvian rainforest in search of *ayahuasca*, the potent

1 Psychoactive substances used in ritual settings with healing or religious purposes.

hallucinogenic brew which was traditionally consumed in the upper Amazon in the practices of plant healers using it as medicine and also as a tool for establishing contact with the spirit world. *Ayahwasca* is prepared from a combination of plants which, in the local context, are considered to be sentient beings that are able to share knowledge with people and may only be understood in the broader context of ecosystem relations grounded in animistic cosmology. Thus the brew itself is an animated and intentional entity which enables communication between humans and non-humans: plants, animals and ancestral spirits. Woodroffe came to the Peruvian rainforest to gain knowledge about the *ayahwasca* rituals in order to use it in the treatment of post-traumatic stress disorder and addiction. An integral part of these rituals are the so-called *Iquaros*, songs chanted during the ceremonies which are considered not to be composed by humans, but given by the plants themselves and endowed with the potential to cure. Woodroffe killed Maestra Olivia after she refused to share her sacred chants with him.

Although *Cull of Personality: Ayahuasca, Shamanism and the Death of the Healer* is not, strictly speaking, an anthropological work (as Tucker does not ground his study in ethnographic methodology), it touches on deeply anthropological problems. The book takes the form of an extended essay, well-grounded in scientific literature. It is organized around the history of the conquest of the Americas, which serves as a starting point for the author's reflections on civilization seen as a tool of legitimization for the invaders' exploitive attitude, the problem of commodification of non-human others and the enslavement of local people. Tucker gradually unmasks the parallels between the processes which led to the tragic death of Maestra Olivia and the history of South America, a continent whose inhabitants and entire ecosystems have been extracted, reduced to resources and brought into new contexts deprived of their previous relationships. *Ayahwasca* shamanism became, in the author's view, a part of this assemblage. "*Ayahwasca* becomes the new gold. In the drastic retelling of the world, the one that lies at the heart of civilization from its inception, everything is a resource. Every resource has value" (p. 126). He recalls that the *ayahwasca* rituals in the form that we know them today were partly an answer to colonial oppression. They came about in the reality of rubber tapper camps as an instrument for resistance and as means of understanding a world which was forced upon indigenous people. Psychedelic tourism is for Tucker an act of spiritual extractivism which produces plastic medicine people and turns *ayahwasca* into a commodity.

The origins of Western interest in psychedelics date back to the second half of the 20th century, particularly to the discovery of the psychoactive potential of LSD by the chemist Albert Hoffman, as well as to Gordon Wasson's article in *Life* magazine in 1957 reporting on his participation in an indigenous ceremony of magic mushroom consumption which popularized knowledge about sacred plants and triggered a wave of psychedelic pilgrimage to Latin America. These events, together with the growing interest in non-western forms of spirituality, most notably shamanism, and the

counterculture movement paved the grounds for the psychedelic revolution. *Ayahuasca* itself entered the Western imagination with the publication of William Burroughs and Allen Ginsberg's *The Yage Letters*. The fifties and sixties were also a period of experiments aimed at introducing psychedelics into mainstream psychiatric therapies for mental disorders, which were then abandoned at the end of the sixties. During the era of the "War on Drugs", the psychedelic became an object of moral panic, a taboo, and practices connected with it were turned into a criminal activity. However, since the nineties there are strong global efforts by the scientific community to re-establish research on these substances and re-introduce them into mainstream medicine, especially for their potential in treating depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety disorders of terminally ill patients and addiction. In this process, psychedelics turn into medicines which may serve as a cure for modern crises, such as the opiate crisis or the epidemic of mental disorders often linked with a lack of meaning and community bonds. The psychedelic renaissance has resulted also in a drastic growth of psychedelic tourism and the amount of psychedelic retreats (criticized in Tucker's book), as well as of scientific publications on psychedelics.

Although Tucker does not refer directly to the phenomenon of a psychedelic renaissance, I find this book an important voice which may add very valuable insights for the ongoing debates within this turn. The author indicates dangers connected with this movement, such as the possibility of epistemological misunderstandings that may lead to the misuse of indigenous knowledge. Indeed, I read Tucker's book as a vast essay about deeply ontological enquiries. Thus, the issues analysed in the book seem very relevant to current anthropology where the problem of postcolonial encounters, and of the knowledge which has been produced through them, are hotly debated topics. Posthumanism postulates the need for a "decolonization of thought" (following Viveiros de Castro's famous quote) which should be performed on several levels. On the one hand, this should be achieved through recognizing that there are different ways of getting inside the worlds around us: and that therefore Western science should not be treated as the only proper epistemology, while any other cosmologies are seen simply as "beliefs". On the other hand, it should equally be implemented through avoiding scientific practices which may lead to treating local knowledge as a resource that could be introduced to our worlds without taking seriously local claims for this knowledge.

What remains questionable, however, is the rather extremist and unilateral perception of relations between the "Westerners" and the "Indigenous" which seem, in the author's view, doomed always to fail. He also passes over the problem of abuse committed by the second party or – what seems to me even more important – the possibility of creating common worlds together. Perhaps it would be enriching to move beyond the question of whether such encounters should happen at all, as such a strong statement that they should not could also be seen as an act of paternalization

of local communities, and ask instead under what conditions they might happen in order to create valuable relations for both sides.

REFERENCES

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