

Trippin' Balls

Jim Richardson and Allen Richardson

Few writers have tackled the issues that surround tripping balls as lucidly as Terrence McKenna or Dr. Rick Strassman. The central question each wrestles with is the extent to which the psychedelic state imparts valid information.

Add Dr. Jeremy Narby to this short list of writers asking tough questions and making scientifically uncomfortable observations. Narby's book *The Cosmic Serpent: DNA and the Origins of Knowledge* is a welcome addition to the literature about the mysteries and promises that lie along the psychedelic frontier.

Narby, an anthropologist, encountered native South American psychedelics while living with indigenous people in the Amazon. The main hallucinogen used in that part of the Amazon is a brew called ayahuasca, the use of which is primarily confined to tribal shamen, or ayahuasqueros. But the ayahuasqueros share it with anthropologists who dare to compromise their "objectivity" by trying some.

Narby's ayahuasca experience led him to reject certain key assumptions of Western science, about the nature of reality, objectivity and the acquisition of knowledge.

Perhaps the most salient details of Narby's first ayahuasca jungle trip were the 50-foot long, fluorescent, telepathic god-snakes he encountered. When they silently informed him that he was only a puny human, his mind split open, "and in the fissures, I [saw] the bottomless arrogance of my presuppositions" (*Cosmic Serpent* p. 7).

Then Narby felt he was going to vomit, which ayahuasca induces, and he had to step over the snakes to get to a suitable tree to barf behind.

As he stepped over them, he apologized and said excuse me.

This is one of the hallmarks of the true hallucination—confusing the psychedelic state with reality. It is something that does not generally happen on LSD for instance (although we are prepared for your e-mails with stories of exceptions—bring 'em on!). On LSD, and most other psychedelics, the visions and visual effects are generally recognized by the tripper to be effects of the drug. In this way the word "hallucination" is somewhat loosely used when applied to LSD-like effects. LSD is best understood as a pseudo-hallucinogen.

However, the effects of ayahuasca can truly be called hallucinations. They are confused with reality. On ayahuasca, the feeling is not that one is experiencing mere drug effects. The ayahuasca experience is like having a veil ripped away, enabling one to see real aspects of the world that are normally invisible. That is why Narby excused himself to the 50-foot, fluorescent, telepathic god-snakes as he stepped over them.

Two days after his experience, Narby asked his local ayahuasquero, Carlos Perez Shuma, "What are these enormous snakes one sees when one drinks ayahuasca?" Shuma answered, "Next time, bring your camera and take their picture. That way you will be able to analyze them at your leisure."

Narby dismissed this and said he doubted the snakes would show up on film. Shuma replied, "Yes they would, because their colors are so bright" (*Cosmic Serpent* p. 19).

To Western ears, Shuma appears to be making a charm-



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ing, but childish and primitive, conceptual error. In the West we believe hallucinations are merely interesting visual drug effects, so logically there can be no way to take their picture. If one could take a picture of a hallucination, then the hallucination would have an objective reality.

And yet we should not be too surprised to learn that there may be something gonzo going on here. For if any objective information can be imparted from these drug experiences, then they are not merely inner, subjective experiences. If a hallucination provides actionable information, is it really just a hallucination? Or must it then be considered—in some sense—an objective reality? If this is so, then Shuma's confusion becomes understandable; he might still be wrong, but we might ask whether he is truly confused.

Consider that the ayahuasqueros claim that their objective knowledge of the world is received from beings they meet while tripping balls, and that this knowledge is practical. Here is a striking example:

"Amazonian shamans have been preparing ayahuasca for millennia. The brew is a necessary combination of two plants, which must be boiled together for hours. The first contains a hallucinogenic substance, dimethyltryptamine [an alkaloid abbreviated DMT], which also seems to be secreted by the human brain; but this hallucinogen has no effect when swallowed, because a stomach enzyme called monoamine oxidase blocks it. The second plant, however, contains several substances that inactivate this precise stomach enzyme, allowing the hallucinogen to reach the brain. The sophistication of this recipe has prompted Richard Evans Schultes, the most renowned ethnobotanist of the twentieth century, to comment: 'One wonders how people in primitive societies, with no knowledge of chemistry or physiology, ever hit upon a solution to the activation of an alkaloid by a monoamine oxidase inhibitor. ...'

"So here are people without electron microscopes who choose, among some 80,000 Amazonian plant species, the leaves of a bush containing a hallucinogenic brain hormone, which they combine with a vine containing substances that inactivate an enzyme of the digestive tract, which would otherwise block the hallucinogenic effect. ... It is as if they knew about the molecular properties of plants ... and when one asks them how they know these things, they say their knowledge comes directly from hallucinogenic plants" (*Cosmic Serpent* pp. 10-11).

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