
Book Review

Global Ayahuasca: Wondrous Visions and Modern Worlds. By Alex K. Gearin. Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press, 2024. 296pp. \$30 (paperback or e-book), \$120 (hardcover).

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Ayahuasca practices take place in diverse forms and for distinct reasons on a global scale. The motivations that drive participation in such settings are vastly different across the widest spectrum of seekers, from Indigenous individuals and groups to collective raves. While religion is a worthy lens for capturing aspects of such drives, it is a term that warrants qualification. If one defines religion as a way of understanding or explaining the ‘awesome’, then Alex Gearin’s book certainly has significance in religious studies as it proposes to examine ‘wonder’ as a visceral and metaphysical state of mind that divergently unifies ayahuasca seekers in their quest for a greater comprehension of what underpins reality. The method for their quest is the ritual ingestion of ayahuasca, the brewed mixture of *Banisteriopsis caapi* and *Psychotria* or various other admixtures, which induce the experience of what Gearin refers to as ‘wondrous visions’. It is through these visions that one can see the real world, a world which is otherwise obscured. In turn, Gearin describes how his interlocutors also experience wonder toward the ayahuasca brew itself as a pathway to knowledge. Indeed, as Socrates urged, wonder is the state from which wisdom and philosophy commence (Plato 1997), placing curiosity and awe as pillars for deeper understanding and growth. In an approach that resonates with Scott (2016) and Srinivas (2018), Gearin sets out to understand this state of wonder which lies at the heart of mystical and philosophical inquiry while also examining his own anthropological state of wonder as he encounters ayahuasca ceremonies across the globe. In this way, the author is participating in an emerging turn toward wonder as a subject, a method, an approach and as a state of self-reflection in anthropological works (Kunce 2012; Timmer and Tomlinson 2018; Torres 2023).

Global Ayahuasca: Wondrous Visions and Modern Worlds is a welcome analysis and synthesis of diverse ways that ayahuasca is experienced in three distinct corners of the world. It is a much-needed addition to the ayahuasca and psychedelic literature. Gearin builds upon existing work that documents how the use of ayahuasca is not exclusive to its endemic Amazonia plant origins as both the plants and new rituals have since been naturalized elsewhere. The book blends academic rigor with an engaging self-reflexive style that offers insights into the lived experience of his field sites. He applaudingly steers away from the edge of sensationalism and universalism of psychedelic research as well as from the exceeding abundance of sloppy material published on the internet for the general public. He achieves this by blending ethnographic description with academic research in exploring the diverse ways in which the cultural shaping of wonder is central for ayahuasca participants and practitioners. While the contexts and rituals vary, they all seek to connect with the divine, heal the body/soul, and gain wisdom while blending indigenous traditions with global spiritual currents.

This captivating monograph draws on experiences and theories surrounding ideas of 'wonder' and 'modernity', the organizing tropes of this volume. While texts focused on wonder tend to reflect upon an openness toward transcendence, modernity is often posed as its adversary for its propensity toward concrete explanation, control and notions of progress. They are also epistemologically distinct with different senses of temporality, wonder being timeless and cyclical (as religion) and modernity tending to be more linear. However, Gearin's ethnographic insights regarding ayahuasca settings at all of his field sites complement the broad Lowland South American anthropological literature that shows how modernity does not dispel wonder but instead seems to often make it more accessible, more comprehensible and at times more real.

Furthermore, what is most novel and indispensable to this book is how Gearin does not shy away from presenting ayahuasca ceremonies in his field sites as commercial endeavors. He is careful not to present capitalist activities as being in direct contradiction to the awe-seeking actions of participants' ayahuasca quests. He discusses capitalism in its many forms and guises throughout and knowledgeably focuses on many of the transactional aspects of these rituals for both practitioners and participants. Whether it is the Peruvian healer striving to make ends meet by acknowledging that their craft is also a means to accumulate capital, Australian practitioners avoiding blatant capitalist terms to require payments and most ostensibly Chinese participants who use ayahuasca visions as a vehicle to master career goals so as to maximize one's income. Overall, such micro-events and analyses need to

simultaneously be mindful of how ayahuasca entrepreneurship is part of a complex set of globalization processes in which capital flows in mostly one direction - from the Global South to the Global North as they form part of these larger broad sweep uneven neocolonial exchanges (Peluso 2014; 2016).

Gearin takes the commercialism of ayahuasca practices as given and presents their increasingly popular use as bridge between the enchantment so often manifested by religious traditions and modern quests for meaning. His book is a testament to how wonder continues to inspire and fuel people across different cultures and eras. Here, ayahuasca usage, like religion, is seen as reflecting a set of beliefs, practices, and traditions that arise from a deep sense of wonder about existence, the universe, and the divine, seeking meaning, purpose, and connection beyond the material modern world. As Gearin puts it, 'such experiences can purify and triangulate the here and now by transcending it, thus allowing the person to encounter vastly amplified or different renditions of themselves, their societies, and their modernities' (233). As demonstrated through the recounting of these fine-tuned global narratives, wonder and modernity together disrupt ordinary perception, leading to moments of insight or revelation while simultaneously leaning upon tradition and also breaking away from it.

References

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