Making Sense of Ayahuasca Non-Sense: A critical study of UK groups consuming a psychoactive plant mixture and their struggle to find religious meaning

by

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Declaration

This thesis is the sole work of Dr Andrew Kristoffer Dean and has not been submitted for any other degree. Where published and unpublished work is drawn on, it is directly referenced in this thesis and credit is given to the author(s). The thesis is 80,749 words in length. Research ethics issues were handled appropriately within the University of Kent's School of Anthropology and Conservation.

Abstract

How we make sense of ourselves, and the cosmos is an ongoing concern, guided by the people we meet, environments we exist within, and plants we consume. Having spent over a year observing forty-nine participants within three UK-based ayahuasca churches, it is clear that the psychoactive 'brew' ayahuasca creates intense changes to how individuals think about themselves and the world they live in. At the heart of the ayahuasca experience are non-sensical hallucinations and visions, which often exist outside of perceptual understanding, leaving individuals feeling lost in an unknowable universe. As we will come to see, making sense of non-sensical ayahuasca experiences requires individuals to negotiate multiple 'common-sense' views of reality. Taking a view that mind is something that happens within life, this ethnographic study uses participant observation, interviews, conversations, personal diaries, and my experiences as an ayahuasca tourist to detail how making sense of reality is also an act of making oneself. In so doing, I argue that ayahuasca hallucinations and visions function as a source of ongoing mental innovation, facilitating preferred views of reality throughout these psychoactive churches. Critically, we will see how frequent ayahuasca consumption engenders in-depth beliefs in the supernatural, and in particular, devotion to the goddess Ayahuasca, who functions as the unchallengeable road to knowing oneself and reality. Acting as an otherworldly guide, the immaterial goddess Ayahuasca plays a key part in how individuals convert non-sensical experiences into sense, while providing practical advice for how to achieve salvation. Problematically though, positioning the universe and oneself as predominantly supernatural tends to erode beliefs in the physical world, leaving these churches with incoherent views of reality, and at the periphery of everyday social life. As such, church doctrines seem increasingly unable to cope with life outside of their groups, and thus, tactically stigmatise competing views of reality as sinful and individuals espousing such heresies as under the control of malevolent demonic beings. Not surprisingly, this binary belief in a good and evil cosmos is a powerful regulatory force dictating what reality is within these churches, and who church members can claim to be.

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Finally, I would also like to thank my friends and family for their love and support, and in particular, my Mum for discussing this thesis and findings.

Table of Contents

Abbreviations

AAA	American Anthropological Association Code of Ethics (2012)
ASA	Association of Social Anthropologists ethical guidelines (2019)
CA	Content Analysis
CDA	Critical Discourse Analysis
DA	Discourse Analysis
DMT	N, N-Dimethyltryptamine
ISE	International Society of Ethnobiology code of ethics (2008 & 2008)
MAO	Monoamine Oxidase
SSRI	Selective Serotonin Reuptake Inhibitor
UK	United Kingdom
UKC	School of Anthropology and Conservation of the University of Kent (2009).
VoIP	Voice over Internet Protocol

Definitions

To help the reader, the following salient definitions are provided, with my brief suggestions for how to interpret them. As might be expected, fuller definitions are provided throughout this thesis:

Ayahuasca:	N, N-Dimethyltryptamine (DMT)-based brew, capable of inducing intense hallucinations and visions.
Cognition:	The mental processes involved with the sensory and noetic understanding of reality, including thoughts, imagination, memories, dreams, visions, and desires etc.
CA:	A frequency measurement system to code language.
Cosmology:	How we understand our place within an (im)material universe.
Cosmology Episode:	Where we become unable to make sense of ourselves, and lose any understanding of our place in the universe
CDA:	A method that shows how language and linguistic features are used to create meaning and persuade others to think in a certain way.
DMT:	Chemical constituent of ayahuasca (N, N-Dimethyltryptamine).
Ethnobiology:	A hybrid natural and social sciences approach to understanding how humans develop knowledge about biological phenomena and the universe.
Ethnography:	The process by which we come to understand humans and their cultures. Typically linked with participant observation and fieldwork.
Existential Crisis:	An acute loss of meaning within life, often coupled with a collapse of personal teleologies.
Embodied:	Depicts the human as having a physical body, that may or may not have a soul.

Psychedelic:	A mind altering substance that helps humans to experience altered states of consciousness. Often linked with illicit behaviour.
Psychoactive:	A potential synonym for psychedelic but generally without negative social connotations.
Sense-Making:	The embodied process by which humans cognitively and socially come to understand reality.
Self-Making:	The process by which an individual appraises who they are, and who they want, and do not want to be, in relation to physical and social freedoms and norms.

List of Tables

List of Figures

Chapter 1. Introduction

1.1. Motivation and Aim

Ayahuasca is a potent psychoactive plant-based brew that has been consumed by indigenous South American peoples for at least two thousand years, often to induce intense hallucinations and visions (Ott, 1994). In recent years however, European interests in ayahuasca have grown (Jiménez-Garrido et al., 2020), driven by desires for physical and spiritual healing (Winkelman, 2001), personal transformation, magical powers, to speak with spirits, and to see the world as it really is (McKenna, Luna & Towers, 1995). The rapid spread of ayahuasca has been facilitated by a combination of European and North American tourists travelling to South America to consume this brew (Holman, 2011), as well as ayahuasca churches opening in a myriad of European countries to provide domestic ayahuasca ceremonies (Introvigne, Hanegraaff & Folk, 2020). Not surprisingly, academic interests have been piqued by the potential to explore ayahuasca's visionary realms (Shanon, 2010), alongside this brew's claimed therapeutic properties (Fotiou & Gearin, 2019), not only within indigenous communities, but also as part of non-traditional psychoactive cultures such as in the UK (Watt, 2018). Importantly, and while there is little to suggest that ayahuasca is particularly toxic to the body (da Motta et al., 2018), there is growing interest in the acute changes that occur to mind (Palma-Álvarez et al., 2020). At the heart of this concern is that ayahuasca visions are replete with non-sensical visions and hallucinations, which can easily lead us into personal chaos, i.e., cosmology episodes, where we become unable to make sense of ourselves, and lose any understanding of our place in the universe (Weick, 1993). How we make sense of non-sense and bridge gaps of misunderstanding and perceptual discontinuities is through the process of sense-making, which is a foundation of our ability to function as conscious, embodied, cognitive and discursive actors in a knowable reality (Dervin, 1992; Cappuccio & Froese, 2014; Weick, 1995). Critically though, when we lose our ability to make sense as a consequence of cosmology episodes, we become subject to intense psychological traumas, as existential terrors stalk our minds (Dibitonto, 2014). Yet, and having said this, we know surprisingly little about how sense is made of non-sense or

cosmology episodes, as not only are cosmology episodes rare in mundane life, but most day-to-day non-sense is at a low-level, hindering our ability to examine either of these phenomena. Studying ayahuasca however, lets us explore how individuals attempt to make sense of what sits outside of their perceptual understanding (Cappuccio & Froese, 2014), as they mentally wrestle with the strange, wonderful, terrifying, and uncanny elements of hallucinatory and visionary non-sense. As will become apparent through this study, Europeans have little cultural history of consuming ayahuasca (Holman, 2011), which limits their access to common-sense schematic and linguistic resources to understand their ayahuasca experiences, making such individuals highly prone to non-sense and cosmology episodes. Or to put this another way, there is often a mismatch between over-simplified cultural expectations of a psychoactive, and the actuality of the ayahuasca experience.

While ayahuasca is a highly useful lens to explore the nether regions of mind, it must be noted that Europe has a fraught relationship with psychoactives, often assuming that mental phenomena are unreal, and those consuming psychoactives are engaged in illicit and immoral activities (Siff, 2015). Not surprisingly, and while ayahuasca consumption is legal in the UK, it is often consumed in secret, creating difficulties for researchers trying to access tight-knit communities (Dean, 2018). Having said this and having been an active stakeholder within several ayahuasca communities for over a decade, I was able to secure access to three UK-based ayahuasca churches, examining how they make sense of chaotic non-sense and cosmology episodes. Taking an ethnographic approach within these churches allowed me to work with forty-nine participants, and to consider the rich interplay of individual and group sense-making, as new religious cultural sense was brought into being, and order was restored to chaos (Harris, 1994). By addressing sense-making as an embodied process, innovative acts of mind were contextualised in relation to the body, where new ways of thinking, speaking and being were all considered a potential means to make sense of the unknown elements of non-sensical experiences.

Finally, it might be asked why greater consideration was not shown to contextualising ayahuasca with other psychoactive plants and compounds, such as peyote or LSD, both of which create hallucinations and visions. Simply speaking,

the focus on ayahuasca was in part pragmatic, based on the rich potential findings offered within three UK-based churches, in comparison to a relative poverty of psychoactive use with other plants and products. Moreover, the ayahuasca state has already been extensively codified in relation to pharmacology and visual phenomena, enabling different stages to be explored for sense-making (Shanon, 2010).

Drawing this section to a close, the following section moves on and shows the elements driving this study.

1.2. The Question, Aim and Objectives Driving this Study

Having identified research gaps, the following research question has been pulled together to guide this study:

How is sense made of ayahuasca non-sense?

Drawing on the research question, as well as my etic sensitisation to the extant literature, and emic sensitisation to global ayahuasca communities (Kottak, 2006), the following research aim was constructed:

To better understand how sense is made of non-sense within UK-based ayahuasca churches.

Within the main aim, four research objectives were identified, which are presented more fully within the findings and analyses chapters (4-7), but, briefly, include:

1. *To understand the formation of ayahuasca churches and their motivations;*
2. *To elucidate what constitutes ayahuasca non-sense;*
3. *To draw out how sense is made of ayahuasca non-sense; and*
4. *To understand how individuals make sense of themselves within their churches.*

1.3. Research Methodology

This study uses a critical discourse ethnographic methodology (detailed more fully in Chapter 3), examining how sense is made of ayahuasca non-sense. In order to better understand how sense-making is a combined individualistic and social act, several methods were deployed throughout this study based on participant observation, including semi-structured interviews, conversations, and an autoethnography of my experiences. Importantly, and spending time in three different ayahuasca churches allowed a variety of sense-making approaches used by forty-nine participants to be explicated, and systematised in relation to each church, and all churches as a whole. Taking this approach, each participant was considered an individual case, yet also part of an organisation, in the form of the social body of their church. Spending just over a year in these three churches allowed me to develop a sense of closeness with the participants due to having frequently engaged in their daily lives and helping them open up about the challenges of making sense of ayahuasca non-sense. While this study primarily focused on these three ayahuasca churches and their participants, I was mindful that I had spent several years as an ayahuasca tourist in the UK, mainland Europe and South America. As such, I was highly sensitised to the issue of non-sense, and frequently meditated on my experiences, and where appropriate, included my reflections based on my tourist diaries and memories.

1.4. Significance and Contribution

This study increases our knowledge of how sense is made of ayahuasca non-sense. Over recent years, research into ayahuasca has rapidly increased, not only due to it being a potent source of visions and hallucinations (Shanon, 2010), but as it is the most prominent form of psychoactive tourism (Jiménez-Garrido, 2020). Not surprisingly, researchers have focused on a variety of aspects, often to elucidate the composition of ayahuasca (Sklerov et al., 2005), how it functions in the body (dos Santos, 2010), what happens during the ayahuasca experience (Shanon, 2010), and the extent to which it can be viewed as a medical therapeutic (Talin & Sanabria, 2017). While there is much we have learnt, there was a paucity of information

relating to the process of how sense is made of visionary and hallucinatory non-sense (Dean, 2019). Importantly, it is fair to ask why consideration should be given to better understanding ayahuasca sense-making? To answer this question, it is vital that we remind ourselves that making sense is a foundation of cognition (Cappuccio & Froese, 2014), and that our consciousness rests upon our ability to make sense of the chaotic, confusing, and uncanny (Thompson, 2010). How we make sense often depends on the context of what we encounter, and the degree to which we have adequate schematic and linguistic resources to convert non-sense into sense (Dibitonto, 2014). Yet, and while everyday life is full of non-sense, we can easily manoeuvre our way through, backgrounding most of it, while meeting few situations that require our explicit attention (Lanzara, 1999). While this may reduce our sense-making burden, it means that our understanding of how we make sense of intense non-sense is not particularly increasing. This is not to suggest that sense-making studies are not burgeoning, as clearly, they are, but rather that it is difficult to find overt cases of individuals processing high levels of non-sense. For individuals drinking ayahuasca however, hallucinations and visions give a means to explore sense-making within overwhelming non-sense i.e., cosmology episodes, where entirely new views of self and the universe may be constructed (Terwiesch, Loch & Meyer, 2002; Weick, 1993). Reflecting on the literature, and prior to this study, it has proved difficult to predict when high levels of non-sense might arise, in turn limiting our ability to assess this process. This being said, and spending time in three ayahuasca churches gave a schedule of psychoactive ceremonies, and the potential to monitor the ongoing processing of ayahuasca non-sense.

With all sense-making being a key part of ayahuasca church activities, this study shows how sense-making can be an individualistic act, yet also mediated through social interaction. Specifically, though, and as a result of this ethnographic study, the three main contributions to knowledge include:

1. *A deeper understanding of what constitutes ayahuasca non-sense;*
2. *How sense is made of non-sense; and*
3. *How sense is made of self.*

The first contribution explicates the nature of ayahuasca non-sense which can easily overwhelm individuals experiencing hallucinations and visions. As predicted, ayahuasca ceremonies are a rich source of non-sense, but can easily move individuals into existential crises (Dibitonto, 2014) and cosmology episodes (Weick, 1985). At the heart of ayahuasca non-sense is the inability of individuals to use past experiences to interpret what they see and feel, necessitating ongoing attempts to bridge gaps of misunderstanding and discontinuities in reality, via the use of innovative sense-making strategies. It is possible to view ayahuasca as a sense- and self-making catalyst that erodes and undermines prior models of reality, where showing new ways of being creates opportunities for individuals to reimagine themselves within an enchanted universe. However, it must be noted that the psychological distress from non-sense can be tremendous, meaning that there is often much urgency to resolve crises of sense and self, as part of re-establishing a feeling of wellbeing within these ceremonies and churches. To my knowledge, this is the first study that has examined the ethnometaphysical foundations of cosmology episodes, i.e., a common-sense understanding of the reality of hallucinations and visions.

The second contribution details how sense is made of ayahuasca non-sense. Critically, and even though each individual is shown to have their own experiences of making sense of ayahuasca, it is also a social act, regulated within their churches and against set doctrines. While all participants argued that having a 'safe space' was vital for being able to make sense away from stereotypical social views that stigmatise ayahuasca use (Siff, 2015), we must not imagine that the participants were entirely free in the sense they made. This is not to suggest that any individual lacked agency, but rather that they were constrained by more dominant organisational narratives (Thurlow & Helms Mills, 2015). With much sense-making being religious, otherworldly discourses tended to dominate sense-making, with more empowered stories being used to guide weaker individuals into preferred organisational sense (Purchase et al., 2018). Having said this, this approach to making sense seems to work well for backgrounding existential terrors, by creating a shared sense-making model dedicated to resolving tensions and turmoil.

Finally, the third contribution shows how self-making is a foundation to sense-making (Helms Mills, 2003). Broadly speaking, all participants in this study highlighted how the sense they made about the universe was intimately linked to the sense they made about themselves. Importantly, the participants had all sought spectacular changes of self, often desiring supernatural and magical powers (Sierra, Hyman & Turri, 2018), thus predicating non-secular views of reality. Examining how the participants had come to reject the mundane nature of self in favour of being immaterial, it seems that they had been guided into this sense by popular cultural depictions of shamans as magico-religious practitioners capable of wielding tremendous otherworldly powers. We thus come to see the participants as making sense and self as part of a cosmic endeavour, where the goddess Ayahuasca provided unchallengeable sense, while offering salvation for those who follow 'her' divine teachings. Within itself, claiming to be validated by this supreme cosmic being was an ongoing source of validation for these participants, but is an area that has so far received relatively little attention within the ayahuasca literature. Finally, it is worth noting, that extreme supernatural sense appears highly incompatible with much of our mundane and materialist common-sense easily found in the UK, which in turn, led the participants to stigmatise non-church members, and leading these church members to withdraw from their former non-ayahuasca relationships.

1.5. Study Beneficiaries

This study aims to benefit multiple stakeholders, and in particular the three churches who collaborated with this study, alongside the academic community through the formation of knowledge. Examining the three churches first, all church members will be given a copy of this thesis, alongside debriefing sessions to explore aspects such as the findings, analysis, discussion, and conclusions. In so doing, I have attempted to stop this being just a 'paper' based study and have sought to include the participants as ongoing stakeholders. Broadly speaking, it is increasingly recognised that historic ethnobiology studies have tended to background participants as stakeholders (Hunn, 2007), and in response to this, I have heightened participant inclusion. Importantly, this approach will be continued for any academic publications and books coming out of this thesis, which will help

these churches stay well versed in how their data is being used. Taking this approach may help these organisations to better understand their own internal processes and the sense-making tensions that new members experience upon first encountering ayahuasca. And just as importantly, how resilience strategies can meaningfully be developed to reduce psychological distress and social exclusion from drinking this psychoactive brew.

From an academic perspective, this study has added to the conversation about cosmology episodes and how sense and self are made within tempestuous mental arenas of non-sense. To this end, academic papers will be published to disseminate findings, and to explore how non-sense is in fact a pervasive part of life, irrespective of psychoactive use. While psychoactive usage may be considered an outlier in everyday social life, we must remember that there is much we do not know about how non-sense is converted into sense, and publishing studies through this contextual lens offers has the potential to expand our understanding of sense-making processes.

1.6. General Guidance

In reading this study, there are a few key points that must be explained in relation to how I linguistically positioned (1) the brew ayahuasca, (2) the nature of the participant organisations, and (3) supernatural phenomena. While greater consideration of these aspects is of course provided throughout this study, I believe it is important to address these issues now, to reduce any potential confusion. Thus, and as a starting point, it seems fair to say that irrespective of what reality may turn out to be, that words function as ontological statements (Schalley, 2019), 'painting' a certain view of what is possible within this universe. As such, it is important to accept that all authors face a linguistic challenge, as whatever is written has the potential to reveal, obscure, elucidate, and distort reality. Considering that there were forty-nine participants within three churches, and my own autoethnographic experiences from being an ayahuasca tourist, what words to use was often a fine balancing act. This was an acute issue when we consider that my aim was to systematise sense- and self-making processes throughout these individual

experiences, while staying as true to the phenomena as possible. With this in mind, and looking at ayahuasca first, this brew is not normally capitalised as it is not a common noun. Having said this, it was clear that the participants believed this psychoactive was a conscious immaterial deity and supreme agent in the universe i.e., a goddess. As such, and in line with participant preferences, I use the non-capitalised form ayahuasca to depict the psychoactive brew, and Ayahuasca to discern when the participants referred to the goddess. Critically, and while this thesis routinely engages with supernatural issues, I remained a philosophical and religious pluralist throughout this study. This was a consequence of this study not attempting to confirm what reality actually is, but rather to draw out and systematise how the participants made sense of non-sense. As you will see though, I do use epistemological labels where appropriate to clarify participant sense-making. This is perhaps best demonstrated through my use of psychoactive to denote ayahuasca as a drink capable of inducing perceptual perturbations, and where appropriate, highlighting how the participants framed this brew. Unfortunately, though, sometimes it was not possible to use neutral language, as in the case of my use of hallucinations, meaning changes to how external reality is viewed. While I accept that the term hallucination often means something that is not real (Nichols, 2004), there was no reasonable alternative synonym to use, meaning I have used this term, but have often reminded the reader about the loaded nature of this depiction. While the participants often felt uncomfortable with the word hallucination, it was a term they regularly used, as similarly, they had failed to discern or construct a more suitable synonym. Finally, and with the participants preferring to position their sense-making activities as religious and their organisations as churches, I followed their guidance and used these terms myself.

1.7. Thesis Overview

Chapter 2. Literature Review

This chapter explores the core literature focusing on (1) ethnobiology, (2) ayahuasca, (3) sense-making, and (4) the knowledge gaps driving this study. Taking an embodied approach to sense-making, and drawing on externalist and internalist

senses, consideration is made of the physicality of the ayahuasca experience and how it is discursively framed, particularly within the ayahuasca churches studied. Critically, and with cultural resources being a key part of how sense is given and made between individuals, attention is also paid to this area.

Chapter 3. Methodology

This chapter shows the research methodology, alongside the rationale for its use. While this ethnographic study is based within the natural sciences, consideration is also made of social sciences and philosophical perspectives that are vital to this ethnographic approach. With a variety of methods being utilised throughout the ethnography, explanations are provided in relation to interviewing, free-flowing conversations, participant observation, and my autoethnographic role as the researcher. Finally, the use of Content Analysis and Critical Discourse Analysis are overviewed, alongside how this study was validated and warranted.

Chapter 4. The Ayahuasca Churches

This chapter explores the nature of the ayahuasca churches, detailing how I entered and negotiated organisational life. Just as importantly, consideration is also made of participant motivations for forming these churches, how they had sought to develop new religions, and how ayahuasca ceremonies were undertaken.

Chapter 5. Ayahuasca Non-Sense

This chapter elucidates how the participants experienced ayahuasca non-sense arising from hallucinations and visions. Although each experience is individualistic and limited to the mind of each participant, we will come to see common non-sensical themes pervading each church. Importantly, and even though perceptual non-sense can be enchanting, it can also lead individuals into existential crises and cosmology episodes, where any sense of self is lost, coupled with the collapse of

extant sense-making models, leading to the universe becoming a largely unknowable phenomenon.

Chapter 6. Making Sense of Ayahuasca Non-Sense

The chapter details how sense is made of non-sense, as a means for participants to resolve existential crises and transcend their cosmology episodes. As we will come to see, these churches function as 'safe' sense-making spaces, where unfavourable social views of psychoactives and visionary experiences can be avoided, and preferable sense made. Critically, making sense of ayahuasca non-sense is a deeply religious act, carried out by all individuals but codified into accepted church doctrines to guide future sense-making. At the heart of this endeavour is the creation of new schematic and linguistic resources to reframe the universe as a supernatural endeavour, governed by the divine being Ayahuasca. Importantly, and as will become apparent, negotiating what the universe is, and our place within it, is not without conflict.

Chapter 7. Making Sense of Self

This chapter examines how individuals make sense of themselves in relation to ayahuasca, and their new sense-making models of the universe. As we will become apparent, all participants came to view themselves as part of a spectacular journey of self-transformation, working towards having the otherworldly powers of shamans. Unpacking these aspects will reveal how the participants saw themselves and the universe as predominantly immaterial, spiritual and enchanted. Through this lens, the teleology of these churches is to purify and save oneself, where individuals outside of this process are othered as spiritually unclean.

Chapter 8. Discussion and Conclusions

This final chapter overviews and discusses the research findings in relation to previous literature, my emic experiences, as well as the research aim, question, and objectives. Where appropriate, the findings are highlighted to show where the extant literature has been expanded upon, and what implications this has for scholars engaging in ethnobiological research, alongside those carrying out studies in psychoactives such as ayahuasca sense-making. Future work is then suggested, and a consideration is made of how this study has impacted on these three churches as key stakeholders in this study.

Drawing this section to a close, the literature review follows, detailing research that was used to underpin this study.

Chapter 2. Literature Review

2.1. Introduction

This literature review is focused on addressing the background to the research question: *how is sense made of ayahuasca non-sense?* As such, the following areas are examined, including: (1) 'ethnobiology', (2) 'ayahuasca', (3) 'making sense', and finally, the (4) 'knowledge gaps driving this study'. Due to the complexity in making sense of ayahuasca visions and hallucinations, particular attention is paid towards how this is undertaken as an individualistic, social, and organisational act. Importantly, studies into making sense of non-sense have typically been hindered by an inability to predict when overt non-sense would arise. However, and selecting samples within ayahuasca organisations, I was presented with timetables detailing when ceremonies would be undertaken, allowing forward planning of when non-sense might be encountered. Critically, and in reading this chapter, it must be noted that the studies drawn on are only those using English, with no papers cited using any other language. Having said this, and as a starting point, let us explore what ethnobiology is, and why it is relevant to studying ayahuasca sense-making.

2.2. Ethnobiology

In this section, we will explore the conceptual underpinnings of ethnobiology, not always in relation to the consumption of ayahuasca, but as a means to better understand human interactions with plants through this disciplinary lens. Having said this, and with knowledge formation and use often being contested, the following sub-sections address the critical questions of 'what is ethnobiology?', and 'is ethnobiology scientific?' This is followed by the final two sub-sections, where we examine the use of 'plant resources in urban life', and 'psychoactive ethnobiology'.

2.2.1. What is Ethnobiology?

As a discipline, ethnobiology can hardly be considered new (Castetter, 1944), but while it has a long history, it is fair to say that it often receives relatively little broader academic attention, which is unfortunate, as it has much to offer our understanding of the relationship between humans and other biological systems (Pieroni & Vandebroek, 2009). With much confusion over what constitutes ethnobiology, Table 1 provides several salient definitions:

1. 'Ethnobiology is the study of the biological knowledge of particular ethnic groups – cultural knowledge about plants and animals and their interrelationships'. (Anderson, 2011, p. 1).
2. Ethnobiology refers to methods and theories related to culture and biology, exploring interactions between people and the environment (Albuquerque & Alves, 2016).
3. Ethnobiology is the study of knowledge and concepts developed by any culture with regards to biology (Posey, 1978a).
4. 'Ethnobiology as the scientific study of the dynamic relationships between peoples, biota, and environments' (Anderson et al., 2011).
5. 'Ethnobiology is broadly defined as the study of human-environmental interactions in various times and places, covering such topics as traditional and local medicinal uses of plant and animal tissues, but also topics that related to environmental archaeology'. (Wolverton, Barker & Dombrovsky, 2016, p. 25)
6. Today, ethnobiology is, first and foremost, the study of how people of all, and of any, cultural tradition interpret, conceptualize, represent, cope with, utilize, and generally manage their knowledge of those domains of environmental experience which encompass living organisms, and whose scientific study we demarcate as botany, zoology and ecology (Ellen, 2006, p.3).

Table 1. Definitions of ethnobiology.

Overviewing Table 1, we come to see several key aspects which can be synthesised into ethnobiology being the human study of biological systems, and the consequent construction of knowledge. It is thus possible to take a broad stance and argue that any knowledge formed about the biological world can come under the umbrella of ethnobiology, including human beliefs and practices (Kuhnlein & Turner, 1991). As a discipline, ethnobiology spans the natural, humanistic, and social sciences

(Posey, 1987b), while often being a philosophical and historic endeavour (Santos et al., 2005). In this way, ethnobiology is not limited to predictions, or analysis of the present, but can also explore traditional biological knowledge that has existed for several generations (Anderson, 2011), assessing what has changed or remained static (Albuquerque and Alves, 2016).

Examining the history of ethnobiology, we come to see three epochs consisting of pre-classical, classical, and post-classical periods, which can be further segmented into five phases (Clément, 1998). The first, and pre-classical period took place in the late nineteenth century, seeking to understand how different peoples formed and utilised cultural knowledge about plants and animals. Within this epoch, European ethnobiologists took great economic interest in the 'new world', akin to fifteenth to nineteenth century European settlers, who catalogued the biological world in line with increasingly utilitarian perspectives (D'Ambrosio, 2014; Albuquerque & Medeiros, 2014).

Moving on, we see the second phase of ethnobiology within the classical period, which occurred within the earlier part of the twentieth century, where scholars re-orientated their focus to understand how indigenous peoples made sense of their environments (Clément, 1998). Methodologically, this period moved beyond describing phenomena of interest, to embracing cognitive, linguistic, and psychological ethnobiology (Hunn, 2007) explicating how indigenous people viewed themselves and the world they lived in. Continuing to explore indigenous peoples, the 1970s and 1980s saw the rise of the third phase, and a holistic approach towards examining the ecological contexts for indigenous peoples' values and beliefs, alongside trying to understand how to manage biological resources (Hunn, 2007).

With the start of post-classical period and fourth phase of ethnobiology in the 1990s, a paradigm shift took place, through recognising the importance of indigenous and non-indigenous peoples' knowledge to protect biological diversity, natural resources, and maintaining well-being (ISE 2004; Albuquerque and Alves, 2016). It is possible to see this period as one of greater disclosure of research findings and attempts to make research subjects key stakeholders within the research process

(Hunn, 2007). Further shifts within this discipline also saw a widening of research methods, which has continued to today, including a desire for qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches (Begossi, 1996; Phillips & Gentry, 1993).

At present, we are in the fifth phase of ethnobiology, which can be considered highly integrative and interdisciplinary, focusing on dynamic environmental and cultural change (Wolverton, Chambers & Veeto, 2014a). Working with scholars from different academic disciplines has increased the methodological tools available to explore the fine-grain processes related to the 'classification and cognition of nature' (Anderson, 2011, p. 5). For example, these collaborations have led to what might be considered a structural 'reformation' of ethnobiology and new insights being unpacked from working with scholars in environmental management, conservation biology, and environmental ethics, to name but a few areas (D'Ambrosio, 2014; Wolverton, 2013; Wolverton, Nolan & Ahmed, 2014b). Pivotally though, we must not imagine that the previous stages have dissipated from scholarly debate, as they are still being negotiated on an ongoing basis. Thus, and while this study is clearly embedded within the fifth phase, it also draws on prior stages, as will become apparent throughout this thesis.

To help us better understand the epistemological nature of this study, the following sections unpack the extent to which we can view ethnobiology as scientific. Reminding ourselves that Table 1 emphasised the scientific nature of ethnobiology, this might seem like an odd or even fruitless endeavour. However, when we consider the vast number of approaches, paradigms, methods, and methodologies used in current ethnobiology, we must ruminate on whether ethnobiology is a scientific discipline, and just as importantly, the degree to which knowledge formed in this study is scientific. The issue is critical to better understand the epistemological claims that can be made and extent to which we can regard this study as true, alongside what form of reality we believe it represents.

2.2.2. Is Ethnobiology Scientific?

For at least three thousand years, the nature of reality has been approached through a myriad of different epistemological lenses (Webster, Tanner & Torrance, 2010), with natural scientists increasingly arguing for an unchallengeable right to speak about reality (Harris, 2017). But what is science? And what, are the limits to which scientists can speak about the universe? In addressing these questions, we shall explore not only whether ethnobiology is best considered a scientific discipline, but the extent to which it is scientific in practice. As a starting point, and at present, materialist science is an empiric and objective enterprise, orientated towards developing predictable and testable models of the universe (Wilson, 1999). Broadly speaking, natural scientists work towards atomising complex physical phenomena, while systemising laws to account for the universe (Heilbron, 2003). For the natural scientist, what matters is matter, with little consideration made for things which are not material. Or as Bowie (2013) and Perman (2010) argued, for the modern materialist mind, spirituality and religion are simply psychological artefacts, and are in essence, unreal, and generally unimportant. As such, the immaterial exists outside of scientific notions, and certainly outside of a locked physics. However, disciplines such as ethnobiology can approach the spiritual and phantasmagorical, by exploring the plants which allow access to these phenomena, either as something real, imagined, or induced by a pharmacological agent. Critically, this thesis is not particularly concerned with assessing whether otherworldly beings or realms are really real, only in accepting that they might be considered as such by the participants and their churches, and ergo, a key part of the sense- and self-making processes.

While science is a powerful research lens to explore the natural world, it is also a globalised system of knowledge, requiring adherence to professional norms such as secularism, positivism, and objectivity. Problematically, this system generally leaves little room for non-laboratory testing, or the consideration of how humans interact with plants and form cultural knowledge. Having said this, ethnobiology often takes a more encompassing epistemological view, as it is an inductive discipline, allowing for a variety of approaches with empiricism, experimentation, and fieldwork (Anderson, 2011). Importantly though, while the natural sciences

often focus on creating a singular positivistic view of the universe, ethnobiology considers how knowledge is formed and negotiated, which also embeds it within other arenas such as philosophy and linguistics. Taking a step further, the extent to which knowledge supports a singular view of the universe i.e., one reality, is itself highly contested (Trusted, 1997), with this aspect being explored throughout the findings chapters.

Within academic science, there is often a propensity to regard science as something done by natural scientists. Yet, this is unfortunate, as Sillitoe (2009, p. 3) claimed that all humans are at some level scientific, and 'capable of abstract thought and have notions of causality, that they can suspend prior beliefs and will revise these if evidence suggests that they are wrong, even if counter-intuitive'. Or as Nader (1996, p. 11) suggested, science is not only carried out by laboratory scientists, but is a key part of 'human societies doing science, or accumulating knowledge by verifying observation' and taking 'a self-conscious attitude toward knowledge and knowing that embodies curiosity with empiricism'. Having said this, such views are not particularly popular within the greater scientific community, which privileges laboratory findings, and tends to dismiss the human and social sciences, while showing little interest in local systems of knowledge (Sillitoe, 2009). Thus, and while 'mainstream' science may typically background how cultural knowledge is formed (Franklin, 1995; Harding, 1994; Haraway, 1988; Harris, 1998; Nader 1996; Turnbull, 2000), ethnobiology, is a means to explore these avenues, by working with local groups functioning as 'experts' (Posey, 1987a). Not surprisingly, new methodological tools are frequently required to allow scientific examination of non-laboratory phenomena, often to allow more nuanced consideration of utterances, behaviours and the mental realms. Discussing the complexity of what might be examined, Anderson (2011, p. 9) stated:

> 'We also find that traditional knowledge everywhere is taught through stories, songs, physical participation in activities, and other methods that engage the emotional, aesthetic, and physical as well as the cognitive portions of experience. This total-person learning. It is part of a rich, full engagement with the world, rather than being isolated… A major need of ethnobiology is to point out the different

> "ways of knowing" (Goulet, 1998) and to teach people to learn each other's' ways'.

Thus, and following the suggestion of Sillitoe (2002), scientists must come to better engage with common epistemologies within our societies if they are to understand how people make sense of the world and themselves. Having said this, attempting to carry out an ethnobiological study is no small undertaking, as trying to be scientific with local knowledge or the mental realms is an acute challenge (Cleveland, 2001). This is particularly the case when we consider that personal practices and beliefs are not always recorded or set within systematised theories. Nevertheless, we can still use scientific principles to observe, collect, and analyse fieldwork (Sillitoe, 2009), for theory building and the development of scientific laws (Agrawal, 1999).

Importantly, and accepting that there is a growing depth of understanding about traditional knowledge in relation to indigenous ayahuasca consumption, this study focuses on non-traditional knowledge-based sense-making from the UK. Drawing this section to a close, we will now move on and examine how ethnobiologists examine biological resources within urban life, which is where this study is situated.

2.2.3. Biological Resources in Urban Life

With humanity increasingly shifting to inhabit urban environments, it is not surprising that ethnobiologists have sought to understand how biological resources such as plants are used within these cultural urban systems (Ladio & Albuquerque, 2016). Within itself, towns and cities have become 'fertile' cultural grounds for plant-based innovation, extending how plants are used beyond the agricultural (Derruau, 1964). While it is fair to say that modern living is certainly a departure from more classical ways of being, we must not imagine that humans have entirely distanced themselves from the natural world, as there is still a strong relationship of interdependence (Ladio & Albuquerque, 2016), particularly as humans long for ongoing experiences with plants and animals (Duarte Almada, 2010). Helping us

understand more about urban ethnobiology, Ladio and Albuquerque (2016, p. 34), argued that it is:

> '[T]he study of the interrelations (whether symbolic, affective, emotional, or material) that are established, individually and/or collectively, between city dwellers and natural resources (animals and/or plants) to which they have access. In this interrelationship, it is possible to highlight tangible (biological resources) and intangible (values, norms, and rules prevailing in each particular worldview) components, which determine the flow of these interrelationships in the lives of individuals and groups i.e. their entry, exit, exclusion and subordination. The determination of the forces that explain this flow of interrelations is one the biggest challenges of urban ethnobiology'.

Embedded within globalisation, and fluctuating patterns of human and biological migration, urban areas are increasingly functioning as cultural melting pots (Quave, Pardo-De-Santayana, & Pieroni, 2012), requiring new sense to be made about a mixture of heterogenous biological concepts (Ceuterick, Vanderboek, & Torry, 2008; Ceuterick, Vanderboek, & Pieroni, 2011; Duarte Almada, 2010). In comparison, and where there is a low mobility of people, ideas and biological species, cultural inertia is likely to be the norm, reducing the exchange and formation of new cultural knowledge (Medeiros, Soldati & Alencar, 2012). Critically, it is possible to view such aspects through the Diffusion of Innovation Model (Rogers, 2003), where multiple cognitive, social, and cultural factors facilitate or hinder the adoption of new practices and knowledge. For example, individuals undertaking ayahuasca tourism are potential vectors of new knowledge and practices within their host communities, as well as functioning as ongoing cultural innovators when they return to their home communities (Dean, 2019). We must remember though, that innovative knowledge tends to be contested, and there is no guarantee that traditional models of belief and practice will be overturned by newness.

Broadly speaking, and from an ethnobiological perspective, knowledge may be regarded as traditional or non-traditional. Traditional resources refer to biological entities that have been present for a 'long time' in an environment, enabling the development of what eventually becomes traditional knowledge. On the other hand, non-traditional knowledge suggests the presence of biological entities in a community that are atypical, and that are relatively new, which enable innovation and the creation of non-traditional knowledge. For example, the prolonged use of ayahuasca within various South American communities can be considered traditional knowledge, but when used in UK communities, becomes non-traditional. Although, and if used for long enough, and adopted widely, a plant-based brew such as ayahuasca might become traditional, albeit with nuanced practice and belief in comparison to where it originated.

Within urban environments, plants are the most studied biological resources, particularly as medicines (Ceuterick, Vanderboek, & Torry, 2008). Accepting that urban landscapes tend to reduce the variety of plants in comparison to the natural world, humans are prolific innovators, often creating endless new ways to utilise plants. As such, it is not uncommon to find people using plants as decoration, food, medicine, or in spiritual and religious practices (Alves, Vieria & Santana, 2012). Or as in the case of this study, using plant-brews such as ayahuasca to engage with spirits and the divine, while remaking sense and self. This being the case, the following section considers the arena of psychoactive ethnobiology.

2.2.4. Psychoactive Ethnobiology

Psychoactives are (bio)chemical substances that alter brain function, and create changes to consciousness, perception, cognition, and behaviour (Maurer & Brandt, 2018), often through hallucinations and visions of immaterial beings which exist in phantasmagorical realities (Harner, 1973). While it is possible to manufacture psychoactive chemicals (Al-Banaa et al., 2020), ethnobiology tends to focus on cultural uses of psychoactive 'magic' plants (Bussman, 2016) which may be eaten as food, medicines, sedatives or stimulants, including caffeine, ayahuasca, ibogaine,

tobacco, cocaine, morphine and atropine (Howe & Jander, 2008). Commenting on this, Bussman (2016, p. 163) argued:

> ‘Hallucinogenic [psychoactive] plants are traditionally used to induce altered perceptions, and ultimately mystic/religious experiences, and contact to the spirit world. In addition, such plants are often employed in traditional healing, to divine the type of illness and the needed remedy, as well as to put patients at ease to allow for a better diagnosis’.

Depending on the geographic location, most cultures have a variety of psychoactive plants, that are relied on to heal and achieve mystical goals, even if they do tend to sit outside of European and North American medical regulation (Al-Banaa et al., 2020). The adoption of psychoactive plants as cultural resources within Europe is an ongoing dynamic process (Palmer, 2004; Stepp & Moerman, 2001), where perceived effectiveness is considered against the potential to use the plant as a medicine or means to commune with the otherworldly (Phillips & Gentry, 1993; Stepp & Moerman, 2001). Looking at how this process takes place, the key to any new plant being adopted within a community is due to its availability or contact with other cultures using exotic plants (Stepp & Moerman, 2001; Van Andel et al., 2012). The adoption of exotic species has been argued as a diversification strategy allowing therapeutic gaps to be filled, which are not tackled by plants or other resources common to a region (Albuquerque, 2006; Alencar, Araújo, & Amorim, 2010). Not surprisingly, examining medicinal plants, psychoactive or other, is receiving much attention from ethnobiologists, as de Sousa Araújo et al. (2016, p. 143) argued:

> ‘The theme of medicinal plants is undoubtedly one of the most disseminated in ethnobiology, which can be explained by (1) the interest it generates in other knowledge areas, such as pharmacy, botany, and agronomy, among others; (2) its relationship to a vital issue, which is health; (3) its relevance for prospecting products aimed at obtaining new drugs of interest to pharmacy or medicine; (4) its well-known and widespread use type among indigenous and

> local communities around the world; and (5) its use as a research model in ethnobiological studies to understand interrelations between people and the environment'.

Examining the prevalence of psychoactives throughout the world, it is clear that they are not uncommon in nature, and while they have been consumed for at least 8,000 years (Merlin, 2003), their use within any society and culture varies greatly. This is particularly apparent when we consider that materialist nations tend to focus more on the mind-altering effects of psychoactives, whereas non-materialist cultures are more concerned with healing, divination and prophecy (Albuquerque et al., 2007; Bussman & Sharon, 1992; Schultes & Hofmann, 1992; Schultes & Raffauf, 1998). Problematically though, and broadly speaking, both modern Europe and North America tend to have a negative view of those who consume psychoactives, which is reinforced by popular culture typically showing psychoactives leading to violence, poverty, brain damage and death for those who consume such plants and products (Siff, 2015). These views are not only highly stigmatising for indigenous people, but also to those from Europe and North America who seek to eat this forbidden fruit (Crocker & Major., 1998; Goffman, 1963). With ayahuasca being one of the most popular psychoactives consumed by Europeans and North Americans, and being the focus of this study, the following section explores this psychoactive brew.

2.3. Ayahuasca

In this section, an examination is made of the physical, spiritual, and religious elements of ayahuasca consumption. As a starting point, the following sub-section asks the question, 'what is ayahuasca?', before exploring the 'pharmacological activity' of this psychoactive, and subsequent 'visions and hallucinations'. Moving on, the final two sub-sections unpack spirituality and religion in 'the ritual experience' and 'shamanic ritual leaders'.

2.3.1. What is Ayahuasca?

Ayahuasca is an N, N-Dimethyltryptamine (DMT)-based brew, capable of inducing intense hallucinations and visions, with the chemical formula of this psychoactive component shown in Figure 1:

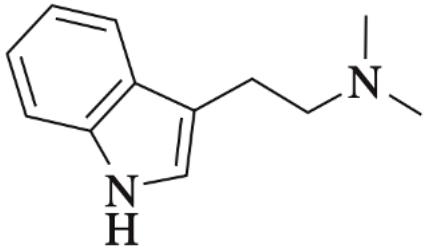

Figure 1. Chemical structure of N, N-Dimethyltryptamine (DMT). Drawn using Chem Draw 10.

As a psychoactive drink, ayahuasca is bitter in taste, and generally made from the vine *Banisteriopsis caapi* (Harris, 2010), and *Psychotria viridis* leaves (Ott, 1994), although it is worth noting that other constituents can be added. The term ayahuasca is derived from the Quecha language (Naranjo, 1983), with *aya* referring to a dead person, spirit, or soul (Whitten, 1976), and *huasca* meaning vine (Naranjo, 1983). Therefore, ayahuasca can be translated to vine of the soul (Schultes & Hofman, 1992), soul vine (Whitten, 1976) or bitter vine (Fotiou, 2010). Other common terms for this psychoactive brew include daime, yage, mii, caapi, and kahi (Naranjo, 1983). Alongside these multiple names, are a variety of socio-linguistic depictions, positioning ayahuasca as a drug (Dobkin de Rios, 1994), hallucinogen (Nichols, 2004), psychoactive (Shanon, 2010), psychedelic (Osmond, 1957) and entheogen (Ruck et al, 1979). Considering that linguistic terms can be ontological statements (Schalley, 2019), how ayahuasca is discursively positioned within any society or organisation is critical for how it is believed to act on the body, and the extent to which hallucinations and visions can be considered real. Table 2 highlights the challenge for how we depict this brew:

Label	Description
Drug	Any substance that creates physiological changes in the body, often positioned in line with legal frameworks, or if outside of such frameworks, as illegal (Shanon, 2010).
Hallucinogen	'…pharmacologically active substances…that…alter consciousness, often in dramatic and unpredictable ways, and in high doses may produce delirium, true hallucinations, loss of contact with reality, and in some cases death' (Nichols, 2004, p. 132).
Psychoactive	Substances and plants that changes behaviour, perception, mood and consciousness, (Siegel, 2005).
Psychedelic	Mind altering (Shanon, 2010), substances and plants, that lead to individuals accessing their souls, and unused potentials of their minds (Weil & Rosen, 1993).
Entheogen	Substances and plants that 'engender the experience of god within' (Roberts & Hruby, 2002, p. 71).

Table 2. Socio-linguistic depictions of ayahuasca.

Examining Table 2 shows a distinct ontological and moral difference for whether ayahuasca is 'just' a drug creating distortions of waking reality (Weil & Rosen, 1993), or a metaphysical catalyst allowing the exploration of immaterial otherworldly realms (Siegel & West, 1975). Throughout this study, I preferred the term psychoactive to denote ayahuasca, as I considered it relatively neutral. In other words, the term psychoactive does not suggest (im)morality, or whether visual experiences are (un)real (Shanon, 2010). Having said this, and due to the rapid marketisation of this brew (Labate, 2001, Labate et al., 2008) there have been increasing tensions amongst users and regulatory authorities over how to classify ayahuasca (Frood, 2015; Taussig, 1987). Reminding ourselves that it takes many years for a culture to develop around a plant-based innovation, we should not be surprised that European understanding is relatively limited regarding ayahuasca, particularly in comparison to rich indigenous cultures which have developed over at least two thousand years (Naranjo, 1983, 1986). It is worth commenting that while the states of Europe and North America still tend to frame ayahuasca as a drug (Siff, 2015; Tupper, 2008), indigenous beliefs are slowly being adopted, positioning ayahuasca as a means to achieve personal transformation, true knowledge (Shanon, 2010), encounters with spirits (Krippner & Sulla, 2000),

transcend the physical universe (Kavenská & Simonová, 2015) and show reality as it 'really' is (Harner, 1973; McKenna, Luna & Towers, 1995).

Even though some North Americans and Europeans may have positive motivations for pursuing ayahuasca, it is an exotic brew in much of the world, and not easily available. As such, tourism orientated towards South America is driven by necessity, as historically, local European and North American sources of this brew have been limited (Talin & Sanabria, 2017). Perhaps not surprisingly, and observing the growing market demand, the number of ayahuasca providers throughout the world is increasing (Labate & MacRae, 2010). Thus, and while ayahuasca consumption is still niche in countries such as the UK, we are slowly starting to see more churches offering this psychoactive brew. For individuals seeking a greater sense of magic and otherworldly experiences (Baudrillard, 1998; Murray, Lynch & Foley, 2016), ayahuasca continues to be an increasingly attractive proposition. As pharmacology is a key aspect of the ayahuasca experience, the next section explores this aspect.

2.3.2. Pharmacological Activity

While there is ongoing debate about the extent to which the ayahuasca experience is driven purely by pharmacology or mediated through the socio-cultural conditions of consumption (Talin & Sanabria, 2017), this section explicitly explores pharmacology. As a starting point, and from a secular-materialist perspective, the psychoactive effect of ayahuasca comes from the molecular constituent DMT, which is plentiful in the plant kingdom (Khan et al., 2010), and also found in mammalian systems including human blood, the brain and cerebrospinal fluid (Wallach, 2009). From extant studies, we know that DMT is a potent hallucinogen (Christian et al., 1977; Hollister, 1977), and that smoking or injecting this molecule will produce psychoactive effects. Yet, if DMT is ingested from the plant *Psychotria viridis*, no psychoactive effects will be produced (Szara, 1956), as DMT will be rapidly degraded in the gut by Monoamine Oxidase (MAO) (Shulgin, 1976; McKenna, 1984). Therefore, and for DMT to have a psychoactive effect, it must be consumed in conjunction with MAO inhibitors, which in the case of ayahuasca is

either from *B. caapi* (harmine and tetrahydroamine), or ß-carboline alkaloids (Rätsch 2005). This synergistic prerequisite for Ayahuasca makes it unlike other psychoactive species such as *Psilocybe* mushrooms and *Salvia divinorum*, which are capable of producing psychedelic effects without the presence of any other plant (Domínguez-Clavé et al., 2016). Not surprisingly, there is much discussion about how the combinations of plants within ayahuasca were discovered and became cultural practices (Naranjo, 1983).

Looking at the role of MAOs within ayahuasca consumption, it is clear that MAOs also function as selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs) (dos Santos, 2010; Wallach, 2009). Thus, and while SSRIs allow DMT to create psychoactive effects through the activation of 5-HT1A and 5-HT2A receptors (Nichols, 2004), SSRIs raise the levels of serotonin throughout the human body, causing a semi-vegetative state by increasing the pulse rate, inducing nausea and vomiting, alongside lethargy (Boyer & Shannon, 2005). From an otherworldly perspective, purging is often viewed as not only a physical act to expel ayahuasca from the stomach, but as a means to eject negative behaviours, emotions and spirits (Talin & Sanabria, 2017). Considering that 95 % of the body's serotonin is found in neural networks that innervate the gut, it is not surprising that purging ayahuasca is central to the ayahuasca experience (Wilson, 2015). Having said this, and even though purging, sweating, visual terrors and fears of imminent death are common, the oral consumption of ayahuasca is considered relatively safe, as there has only been one fatal case mentioned in the literature (Sklerov et al., 2005). Critically, and unlike more traditional illicit drug use, ayahuasca shows little in dependency or long-term damage from consumption (Fábregas et al., 2010), but can lead to weeks of euphoria, followed by a longer-term sense of loss and isolation (Frecksa, Bokor and Winkelman, 2016).

At present, there is much interest in the potential use of ayahuasca as a therapeutic antiaddictive (Doering-Silveria et al., 2005; Halpern et al., 2008; Talin & Sanabria, 2017). Importantly, ayahuasca is believed to act on dopaminergic and serotonergic mesolimbic pathways (Prickett & Liester, 2014), increasing neuroplasticity, and changing neural architectures to reduce pathological associations and triggers (Prickett & Liester, 2014). Shifts to neural architectures have also been linked to

creating heightened states of suggestibility, allowing old memories to be revisited and new perspectives developed (Bouso & Riba, 2014; Fernández & Fábregas, 2014; Loizaga-Velder & Verres, 2014). Furthermore, that increased blood perfusion throughout the frontal brain regions can lead to increased introspection and processing of emotional traumas (de Araujo et al., 2012). As such we may speculate on the extent to which ayahuasca is a means to remake self, with this aspect being heavily explored in chapter 7.

While there is clearly much further research needed into the pharmacology of ayahuasca, the predominant scientific secular-materialist view leaves little epistemological room for ayahuasca being anything other than a drug (Tupper, 2008). This is unfortunate, as even though visions are examined by materialists, this tends to be to elucidate functional mechanisms, rather than exploring their meaning relative to the individuals experiencing them. At the heart of this issue is that while modern materialists may consider visions scientifically interesting, they do not believe them to have any ontological status, consequently, positioning them as nothing more than false representations of the world (Strassman, 2001). Not surprisingly, pharmacological determinism has skewed much scientific research towards the physical body (Reinarman & Levine, 1997), but has left much to understand about the socio-religious context of how this brew is consumed (Uriely & Belhassen, 2005), and otherworldly states of mind that occur throughout this psychoactive experience. Caution should be shown, however, as Labate et al. (2010, p. 218) argued that ayahuasca should not be viewed as a purely pharmacological agent, as while DMT has an efficacy, so too does the environment, ritual, and motivation of the individual. The challenge therefore in explicating the ayahuasca experience is to open oneself to epistemological pluralism, potentially drawing on scientific materialism while exploring the mental realms through philosophy, linguistics, and religion (Salin & Tanabria, 2017), i.e., ethnobiology. In so doing, it may become possible to draw out the fine-grain processes associated with the 'rich symbolic and social meanings' arising during this psychoactive state (Tupper, 2008, p. 300). Finally, and before considering visions and hallucinations in the following section, it is worth saying that a re-contextualisation of modern secular-materialism may go some way to reducing the stigma that many Europeans and North Americans face from being labelled illicit drug users (Dobkin de Rios, 1994; Labate

& Feeney, 2012; Prayag et al., 2015), or otherworldly tourists (Winkelman, 2001). In other words, if ayahuasca can only ever be viewed as a 'drug', then this limits the potential for individuals consuming a non-regulated product to be anything other than a 'drug user'. Helping us dig more into this aspect, the following section embraces non-secular materialist views, to consider what they might mean for individuals imbibing what they often describe as a supernatural concoction.

2.3.3. A Spiritual Medicine?

Having detailed the modern secular-materialist view of ayahuasca as a pharmacological agent, it is worth noting that not all communities accept this premise and mode of action and may instead prefer spiritual explanations of how this brew functions. Examining this aspect, it is worth noting that while industrialised regions tend to currently exist within overt medical materialism, historically this was not always the case, as a myriad of different sets of knowledge have been drawn on, and to a minor degree, still are (Charlton, 2007). As such, medical pluralism is still thriving, with a variety of beliefs rejecting materialist notions of medicine, i.e., that *x* molecule produces *y* effect on the body. Overviewing non-materialist notions of medicine, it is not uncommon to see a mixture of different perspectives, defining reality, the human body, and how we heal. Of particular interest to this study, and in line with participant perspectives, is the notion of ayahuasca as a spiritual medicine. So, what exactly is a spiritual medicine? To answer this question, we must first acknowledge that spiritual ontologies tend to position disease as a consequence of malevolent immaterial spirits, rather than a mechanistic view of the physicalist body (Evans-Pritchard, 1976). Through this spiritual lens, evil spirits may harm us through possession, draining our essence, or corrupting our mind, body, or soul in some way (McCraw, 2017). As we might imagine, there are several underlying philosophical and religious systems that undergird such beliefs, with much still to elucidate in these areas, particularly related to how immaterial beings interact with humanity and the natural world.

With regards to ayahuasca, it seems fair to say that there is a pervasive belief amongst non-traditional consumers that nefarious spirits cause ill health, with the solution to an evil spirit being a magical potion such as ayahuasca (Furst, 1976; Luna, 1984a, 1984b; Shanon, 2012). At present, this view is being rapidly adopted within non-indigenous industrialised communities across Europe and North America, as a means of making overly simple forms of sense about non-materialist systems of healing (Buzinde et al., 2012; Tupper, 2008). From my experiences as an ayahuasca tourist, this often seemed to be the case, with individuals believing that non-materialist medical systems can be reduced to 'a spirit did it', thus requiring a magic medicine for healing. Within itself, such beliefs not only reduce the cognitive burden in making more complex sense about the material and immaterial nature of medicine but appears to be validated by visionary and hallucinatory sensory experiences from psychoactives such as ayahuasca. Of course, spiritual medical beliefs can involve intricate philosophies, but this is something rarely seen with newly emerging religions, where sense-making models are slowly being developed. Having said this, and when we turn to older religions highly prevalent in areas such as Europe and North America, we see Christian beliefs that otherworldly drinks can transform oneself, as in the Eucharist, where wine is supposedly turned into the blood of Christ, thus allowing individuals to commune with God (O'Carrell, 1982).

Ruminating on the discussion so far, we might wonder why Europeans and North Americans who exist within systems favouring pharmacological drugs might prefer non-materialist medicines, and deliberately seek out the magical and miraculous. Importantly, the spread of industrialised medicines has not eradicated the lure of otherworldly cures, and the desire for spectacular personal transformations, with beliefs in magical brews still being pervasive, even when materialist medical practitioners condemn their use (Bibler et al., 2018; Cochrane, 2009). For those who are magically minded, potions should be holistic, spiritual, and capable of warding off wicked spirits, all of which tend to sit outside of the notion of pharmaceutical medicine (Jacobs et al., 2008; Pew, 2010). Intriguingly, those inclined to magical thinking also appear particularly prone to positioning pharmaceutical drugs as fake medicines sold by malevolent capitalist corporations seeking the downfall of humanity (Blaskiewicz, 2013; Lyons et al., 2018). Yet, and

while the magically minded may reject materialist-based therapeutics, Europe and North America have been far from convinced about the sale of supernatural potions, commonly depicting elixirs as charlatanistic products sold to the delusional (Prayag, 2015; Siff, 2015). Thus, and while ayahuasca consumption is increasing in Europe and North America, common-sense otherworldly notions of medicine tend to be limited, at least in a statistical sense, amongst these wider populations (Dean, 2018). Moving on, and irrespective of how we position the activity of ayahuasca, the next section considers visions and hallucinations that arise from this potent psychoactive.

2.3.4. Visions and Hallucinations

After drinking ayahuasca it takes up to 40 minutes for perceptual shifts to occur, changing how we view our inner and external worlds for up to 6 hours (McKenna, 2004). Changes to our external world through hallucinations and synaesthesia tend to occur first (Chiu, 1989), but are not particularly immersive, requiring time to build up and override our 'normal' perception of the world (Chen & Berrios, 1996). Even though hallucinations are an ongoing part of the ayahuasca experience, they are predominantly visual in nature, distorting and animating everyday objects around us (Ludwig, 1969). Following hallucinations, are inner visualisations, which occur when individuals close their eyes, and challenge what people think is real. Throughout the visionary period, individuals can open their eyes, but in so doing, will disrupt their inner visions, due to the observance of external stimuli (Domínguez-Clavé et al., 2016). It has been argued that the greater the potency of ayahuasca, the more a person will be drawn into inner visions, and the less important physical reality will seem (Shanon, 2010). This can be a slow process though, as it takes time for the inner ayahuasca realms to form and reveal themselves as the psychoactive takes hold of the individual. While visions can be individualistic, there are also common elements of the ayahuasca state and experience (Der Marderosian et al., 1970), with several core structural typologies being shown in Table 3:

Categories of internal visualisation	Descriptions
Visualisations without semantic content	The first visual stage of ayahuasca typically shows visual elements without content, i.e., shapes and flowers in kaleidoscopic patterns based on phosphenes (McDougall, 1977). The earliest visualisations tend to depict bursts, puffs, and splashes, which are sporadic in nature and rarely immersive. Over time, more immersive patterns appear in the form of repetitive non-figurative elements, which give way to geometric designs and patterns, which may be simple, complex, and two or three dimensional.
Visualisations consisting of primitive figures	Moving on from the first stage, primitive figures may emerge, which are often low in visual detail and flickering in and out of view. These figures can be independent of, formed from or part of geometric patterns (Shanon, 2010).
Images	Over time, images may form, which can be linked to the culture that an individual has been immersed in. Having said this, it is common for some images to emerge irrespective of the culture an individual is from, and for example, seeing snakes (Gow, 1988; Lagrou, 1998). Such images may appear static, in front of the individual, or opening in the distance.
Scenes	Entire scenes are immersive, taking up the entire visual space of the individual, and can show detailed story arcs and characters, but where the individual may or may not be taking part (Shanon, 2010).
Virtual reality	Distinct from the previous stages, virtual reality is the most powerful experience for individuals taking ayahuasca, where the vision becomes the new experiential reality. While in some ways like dreams, ayahuasca virtual reality is more phantasmagorical and otherworldly than a dream, with the likelihood of everyday elements of life bleeding into virtual reality being much lower (Shanon, 2010).
Visions of light	While the ayahuasca experience is often regarded as starting with light, the presence of light often occurs throughout the ayahuasca stage, and beyond, both internally and externally.

Table 3. Categories of visions.

Within ayahuasca visions, it is possible to experience Heaven, Hell, and Purgatory, with all being linked to developing new cathartic sense- and self-making models (Frecksa, Bokor & Winkelman, 2016). Such experiences can be physically and psychologically traumatic, particularly as individuals engage in self-reflection (Dobkin de Rios et al., 2002; Frescka, 2008; Frescka, 2011), and work towards perceptual coherence. Intriguingly, these dream-like experiences and emotional memories can function as visionary therapeutics, orientating individuals towards being ethical beings engaged in higher-levels of mindfulness (Soler et al., 2015) 'curing' themselves of past traumas (Loizaga-Velder & Verres, 2014). Of course, it must be remembered that the intentionality of the individual consuming ayahuasca greatly influences the visual experience (Metzner, 1998). As such, individuals are rarely exposed to an open field of experiential possibilities, as instead, their experiences are constrained by expectation, alongside the wider conditions of the socio-physical setting (Mercante, 2013). Looking more broadly at the literature on perceptual anomalies, Luhrmann et al. (2010) argued that personal histories and cultural expectations can easily shape what is experienced within visions and hallucinations. This suggests that we partially drive the otherworldly state, but with little knowledge about the extent to which we can control or select experiences.

It is not uncommon for ayahuasca visions to be viewed as magical realms, replete with immaterial teachers including guides, deities, demons, and animals, who help individuals to make sense of themselves and reality (Luna, 1984a). Traditionally, ayahuasca has been linked to serpents (Dobkin de Rios, 1973; Harner, 1973; Lagrou, 1998), while also showing other mythological and phantasmagorical beings (Shanon, 2010). Even though it is increasingly apparent that visionary beings are a key part of how individuals transform themselves (Frecksa, Bokor & Winkelman, 2016), there has been a lack of consideration of how these immaterial actors give sense about what the universe is, and the individuals place within it. This is unfortunate, as there is still much to elucidate about how humans make sense of spirit interactions (Luhrmann, 2012).

While it is clear that visions are core components of the ayahuasca experience, we must remember that a minority of individuals do not experience visions or hallucinations. Having said this, and even where visual phenomena are not present, it is highly likely that individuals will be immersed in a feeling of otherworldliness, where reality appears more beautiful, enchanting, and full of meaning (Watts, 1962). In such cases, external reality intensifies in detail and colour, with objects and people appearing to be profoundly meaningful. The mundane thus becomes a rich source of intellectual, spiritual, personal, and religious meaning, where anything encountered may provide insights about life, the universe and oneself. Considering that the ayahuasca experience is believed to be mediated through the ritualistic aspects of consumption, the following section examines this issue.

2.3.5. The Ritual Experience

Within ayahuasca ceremonies, great attention is typically paid to the ritualistic elements of consumption, with dedicated spaces and performances being common (Bell, 1997). To help us understand rituals in the context of ayahuasca, it is worth briefly saying that rituals are a frequent part of human life, being used as a means to engage with the sacred (Donald, 1991). While ritualistic activities vary considerably in relation to what is done and what they seek to achieve, they tend to aid in group closeness, while offering psychological wellbeing (Settles, Jellison & Pratt-Hyatt, 2009), and protection from marginalisation providing the rules are followed (Bourguignon et al., 2006). This is often through developing a sense of belonging with similarly minded people, where positive aspects of the experience can be foregrounded and more negative elements backgrounded (Frable et al., 1998; Sellers et al., 2003). As ayahuasca ceremonies are routinely stigmatised as a form of illicit drug use in Europe and North America by competing religions and prevalent social attitudes (Tupper, 2008), private rituals can be a critical aspect of developing kinship and a collective means to mitigate erosive popular narratives while creating new ways of being (Talin, 2012). What constitutes an ayahuasca ritual often varies between organisations, but typically refers to drinking ayahuasca in a spiritual setting, where religious beliefs guide physical and religious practices. Due to ayahuasca being an incapacitant, helpers are often present to attend to the

needs of participants, giving varying degrees of support, and spoken contact, as discussed by Talin and Sanabria (2017, p. 28):

> ‘Ritual leaders pay great attention to how such care is provided, so that it is neither intrusive nor neglectful. In the spaces we observed there are slightly different understandings of what constitutes good care during the ritual itself: in the Santo Daime tradition [a syncretic Brazilian ayahuasca church], it is usually considered best to intervene as little as possible in people’s process, because it is difficult to know much about the process unfolding internally for someone, and cutting this short might impede its full completion. The neo-ayahuasca healing ceremonies observed in Brazil generally share this understanding but often include specific therapeutic interventions, such as the use of somatic or ‘energy’ techniques, aromatherapy or spiritual interventions. Such ceremonies at times make use of a dedicated ‘healing room’ adjacent to the main ritual space, where those in need can be attended to by specialist healers. For many we interviewed, the experience of partaking in a collective process of this nature, of receiving this kind of non-directive care, was, in and of itself, deeply transformative’.

With visions being light sensitive, and more visible at night, most ceremonies take place during this time to facilitate the visual experience. Importantly, rituals tend to use music and singing to guide individuals through visions, with musical content being selected to meet the aims of the ceremony (Kaelen at al., 2015). As such, we must not imagine that ceremonies are static affairs, as even though individuals may experience quasi-vegetative states, they are only temporary, allowing for dance, singing, discussion and ongoing introspection. These social acts can be critical for how individuals engage in social cognition, and collectively start to restructure themselves and views of reality (Fernández & Fábregas, 2014). Importantly, and as the effects of ayahuasca reduce, individuals feel a greater sense of well-being, and euphoria at their perception being back in the external world, often leaving them keen to share experiences and co-construct meanings (Shanon, 2010). As we might imagine, how we interpret and understand the world is often heavily influenced by

our beliefs, motivations, and other mental resources. For example, we know that it is common for people to see talking snakes (Luna, 1984a), which might be problematic for those with a strong Judeo-Christian background, due to perceived links with the Devil (Alves, Vieria & Santana, 2012). For ethnobiologists, such issues can be critical for understanding how people interact and make sense of biological phenomena and contextualise their experiences into divine or demonic knowledge (Anthwal, Gupta, & Sharma, 2010). When we consider the variety of industrialised peoples who pursue ayahuasca consumption, we cannot homogenise samples without deep consideration of traits such as age, gender, religious belief etc. which may greatly influence experiences (Meyer-Rochow, 2009). As it is common for sacred rituals to be highly regulated, we must also explore the extent to which group behaviours are mandated or prohibited and why. With group leaders often having elevated positions of power within ayahuasca ceremonies, the next sub-section explores how religious identities can play a critical part within rituals.

2.3.6. Shamanic Ritual Leaders

At the head of each ayahuasca organisation is a spiritual and ceremonial leader, stereotypically referred to as a shaman (Salin & Tanabria, 2017), although other terms such as priest, medicine man and witch doctor may also be used (Shanon, 2010). The term shaman is derived from the Evenki word ‘šamán’ (Janhunan, 1986), and over past decades, has become a ‘catch-all’ identity (Kehoe, 2000) to denote practitioners engaged in preparing and delivering magico-religious ceremonies (Thomas, 2015). As a religious identity, the shaman is of interest due to all participants within this study claiming to make sense of themselves and the universe through this lens. While shaman is perhaps the best-known term, it is worth noting that it is not uncommon to hear other labels such as witch doctor, brujo and medicine man (Arvigo, Epstein & Yaquinto, 1994). Commenting on the predominant use of the term shaman, Taussig (1989, p. 59) said:

> ‘Shamanism is crucially a made-up, modern, western category, an artful reification of disparate practices, snatches of folklore and overarching folklorizations, residues of long-established myths intermingled with the politics of academic departments, curricula, conferences, journal juries and articles, funding agencies, and so forth’.

It is not uncommon for those claiming to be shamans to argue that they were called into this otherworldly vocation by spirit beings, and to uptake work as mediums, healers, diviners, and magico-spiritual practitioners (Eliade, 1972; Kalweit, 1992). Within ayahuasca organisations, the role of the shaman is critical, often working as a source of innovation to bring back new knowledge from the visionary state, and in so doing, reshape organisational beliefs (Shanon, 2010). It is therefore possible to view a shaman as a regulatory force on their church and congregation (Salin & Tanabria, 2017), re-evaluating extant religious canons and metaphysical beliefs. Yet, the shaman is in a fraught organisational position when engaging with nations embedded within predominantly secular-materialist paradigms. For example, and on the one hand, shamans are romanticised and fetishised as spiritual masters, noble savages, and enlightened magical practitioners who sell spiritual healing to lost souls trapped within a mundane existence (Jauregui et al., 2011; Miklas & Arnold, 1999; Silverman, 1967). While on the other, they are portrayed as untrustworthy ‘snake oil salesmen’, selling dangerous drugs (Boyd, 2002), that lead to violence, brain damage and death (Siff, 2015). Not surprisingly, such views can be highly stigmatising for shamans, who must work to remove these marks of social undesirability and promote themselves as magical masters, rather than drug dealers (Crocker & Major., 1998; Dobkin de Rios, 1994; Goffman, 1963; Labate & Feeney, 2012; Prayag et al., 2015). For those wishing to spend time with a shaman, or claim to be one, this can be a particularly challenging act, especially in places that have negative views of non-pharmaceutical products, and tend to denigrate indigenous practices (Kehoe, 2000). When we consider that ‘From time immemorial, spiritual and magical views of traditional societies have challenged the rational imagination of the Western mind’ (Kalweit, 1992, p. 209), we can see that shamans engaged in stigmatised ayahuasca consumption in Europe and North America (Tupper, 2008),

must negotiate ongoing tensions with their religious practices. Further explaining this issue, Kalweit (1992, p. 52) argued:

> 'For the most part, Western mediums and healers live in a culture that regards their experiences as unnatural, if not pathological, and mediumistic activities are looked at from the point of view of standard psychological norms and are therefore regarded as hallucinatory'.

Having said this, and as cultural notions of the universe have continued to intertwine, ayahuasca is increasingly embedded within a mixture of indigenous and materialist belief systems (Gray, 1997; Luna, 2003; Pollock, 2004). As such, shamans must forge a new way of being in a complex market of ideas, if they are to thrive, and withstand extant stigmatisation. Reminding ourselves that orthodox European and North American religions are in a state of decline (Brown, 2009; Moffat & Yoo, 2019), we seem to live in an age where people are keen to seek their own salvation through more personalised and less abstract religions (Partridge, 2005), such as through the ayahuasca churches in this study. With all UK-based church participants in this study claiming a shamanic view of themselves, the following section examines this highly unusual professional role in relation to non-indigenous practitioners.

2.3.6.1. Neo-Shamanism

While the term shaman is often highly contested, it has become increasingly embroiled in debates regarding the acceptability for non-indigenous people to use this term as part of their own spirituality. As we will come to see in this section, claiming this identity, sits between being criticised for committing a form of cultural theft as a 'plastic' shaman, while also being argued as a means to achieve personal liberation as a neo- or actual shaman. Problematically, for Westerners seeking to use the term shaman, there is a propensity to be accused of engaging in identity fraud, in that such individuals tend to have little to no connection with the cultures and knowledge they claim to represent (Chidester, 2008; Harvey, 1998;

Neuenfeldt, 1998; Rothenberg, 2006). This has become an acute issue amongst a variety of indigenous peoples who argue that plastic shamanic practitioners not only undermine traditional knowledge, but also erode intellectual property rights (Hobson, 1978). While there is much debate about this issue, it is fair to say that non-indigenous practitioners claiming to be authentic shamans can distort knowledge and mislead individuals seeking authentic experiences with genuine shamans (Aldred, 2000). Broadly speaking, this has been particularly noticeable within ayahuasca tourism, where individuals have sought authentic shamans, but instead, met plastic shamans offering a mixture of modern neo-shamanic concepts fused with overly simplified indigenous knowledge (Dean, 2018).

For all of the criticisms of plastic shamans, we must remember that otherworldly identities and knowledge do not exist in isolation from the world, and if anything, remain fluid, to varying degrees, influenced by practitioners, congregations and customers (Partridge, 2005). Critically, and within more industrialised nations, the adoption of plastic shamanic identities has allowed individuals to renegotiate who they believe they are, and the world they live in through a greater repertoire of spiritual and magical resources (Wallis, 2005). For example, it is clear that individuals seeking a shamanic identity often seek to push back against contemporary society, and the 'mechanization and disenchantment of nature, cosmos and the human self' (von Stuckrad, 2002, p. 791). Reflecting on this, we come to see that while the adoption of shamanism has been relatively low in industrialised nations within Europe and North America, that it has been a means to reject consumerism, modernity, and to reimagine nature in all its forms (Noel, 1999). Broadly speaking, it is thus possible to contextualise plastic shamanism within the wider context of the New Age movement, often culturally appropriating traditional knowledge, and being a counter-culture movement against prevalent cultural norms within the dominant society (Ellen, 2021). Within plastic shamanism, the individual works to become empowered through lifting the veil on hidden otherworldly realities, while engaging with spirits, demons, and deities, often irrespective of what indigenous practitioners think. At the heart of this issue is that modern Western epistemologies place little value on the imaginal worlds, and the ability to think oneself into being, with plastic shamanism offering this potential (Noel, 1999). Of course, we should note that for individuals pursuing this less

authentic shamanic path, that imaginary experiences in altered states of consciousness does not necessarily mean fake. For example, and when we consider that orthodox religions often struggle to provide sensory validation (Brown, 2009), psychoactive experiences via hallucinations and visions may meet this requirement (Shanon, 2010).

Overviewing this section, perhaps we should not be surprised that spiritual and religious practices such as neo-shamanism are growing and receiving increased attention, particularly for individuals seeking to create bespoke religions for themselves, picking what works to help them on their journey through life. Furthermore, and for those seeking a professional religious role, it seems clear that claiming to be a shaman can greatly improve their organisational standing and ability to proselytise on the nature of reality and teleological journey of creation.

Drawing this examination of shamanism to a close for now, the next section starts to look at how we make sense of ourselves and the world we live within, as a foundation to how we make sense of ayahuasca.

2.4. Making Sense

In this section, we will explore the processes related to how people engage in the ongoing act of making sense of the world around them, understanding themselves as individuals immersed in social interaction, and, developing knowledge about what exists outside of their perceptual understanding, i.e., non-sense. As a starting point consideration will be made of the individual undertaking ‘embodied sense-making’. Following this, we will turn our attention to how interacting with other people influences what sense we make in ‘social sense-making’. Finally, an examination is made of how individuals construct reality, and deal with crises of sense in ‘ethnometaphysical sense-making’.

2.4.1. Embodied Sense-Making

To be alive is to make sense as an embodied agent. Or as Thompson (2010, p. ix) argued, 'Where there is life there is mind and mind in its most articulated forms belongs to life'. As such, 'The roots of mental life lie not simply in the brain but ramify through the body and environment'. At present, embodiment is an increasingly important part of understanding how individuals make sense of the mundane and supernatural (Waldstein, 2016), with the following section exploring a brief history of the different approaches used in making sense.

2.4.1.1. Mind in Life

Historically, and while the role of mind within making sense can be traced back to ancient Greece (Gardner, 1985), there have been ongoing difficulties in approaching this complex phenomenon. At the heart of this issue is the requirement for scholars to embed themselves within multiple disciplines, including philosophy, linguistics, biology, psychology, and neuroscience etc. 'to account for subjectivity and consciousness' within the embodied being (Thompson, 2010, p. 3). While we can understand mind 'as a process of sense-making' (Barrett, 2015, p. 235), mind has often been approached as a purely cognitive phenomenon, with little attention paid to the body (Thompson, 2010). So, let us look at a brief history of mind in order to better understand sense-making.

In the 1950s, the cognitivist approach arose, initially viewing mind akin to software, with mental processes being undertaken within the brain i.e., the 'computer' (Newell & Simon, 1976). Intriguingly, and within this cognitivist model of mind, little room was left for the body, with Thompson (2010, p. 5) highlighting this limitation by saying 'It is the software, not the hardware, that matters most for mentality'. Just as troubling was the propensity for scholars to negate subjectivity, consciousness, and the role of social interaction within early models of mind and sense- and meaning-making (Pylyshyn, 1984). Following the cognitivist model, connectionism was presented in the 1980s, positioning the mind as a neural network, with cognition arising from dynamic interactions between mind and the

environment (Rummelhart et al., 1986). Unfortunately, connectionism also suffered from similar problems to the cognitivist model, again, leaving little room for subjectivity, consciousness, or the body. Attempting to embrace the physicality of being, the third model focused on mind being embodied dynamicism (Port & van Gelder, 1995; van Gelder, 1998), 'rather than mind as neural network in the head' (Thompson, 2010, p. 11). The foundation of embodied dynamicism is that 'Cognitive structures and processes emerge from recurrent sensorimotor patterns that govern perception and action in autonomous and situated agents' (Thompson, 2010, p. 11). Due to a greater accounting for the body and mind, this study embraces embodied dynamicism in the form of the enactive approach, which is discussed more fully in the following sub-section.

2.4.1.2. The Enactive Approach

Fundamental to sense-making is the notion that we are embodied beings, engaged in an ongoing process of cognitively and socially understanding ourselves within the universe (Thompson, 2010). Broadly speaking, to understand how we make sense is to explore the cognitive workings of mind, elucidating the core structures of being. Yet, and although cognitive studies have 'a very long past' they also 'have a relatively short history' (Gardner, 1985, p. 9), with much contestation about the relevance of mind, the body and social interactions used to make sense. Due to the methodological challenge and complexity of working across the disciplines of linguistics, philosophy, and biology etc., it is not surprising that scholars readily background troublesome methods and focus on overly simplified views of sense-making. This is unfortunate, as it has left much to understand, with Thompson (2010, p. 3) arguing that we must urgently turn our attention to a more holistic approach including the concepts, models, methods, and experiential aspects of sense-making, particularly through a natural sciences perspective if we are to account for subjectivity, objectivity, and consciousness.

Simply speaking, enactive cognition is a dynamic process, arising from the body's interaction with the world. While it is possible to position enactive sense-making akin to behaviourism, caution should be taken with this stance, as in contrast to

behaviourism, the enactive approach has a purpose and cognitive component (Ye, Zeng & Yang, 2019). In this way, the embodied agent does not passively view reality 'which they then translate into internal representations. Natural cognitive systems...participate in the generation of meaning ...engaging in transformational and not merely informational interactions: *they enact a world*' (Di Paolo, Rhonde & De Jaegher, 2014, p. 33). Putting this another way, enaction is 'the manner in which a subject of perception creatively matches its actions to the requirements of its situation' (Protevi, 2006, p. 169-170). Linguistically, the term enaction 'emphasize[s] the growing conviction that cognition is not the representation of a pre-given world by a pre-given mind but is rather the enactment of a world and a mind on the basis of a history of the variety of actions that a being in the world performs' (Varela, Thompson & Rosch, 1992, p. 9). Within this approach, the human as a biological unit is key, focusing on the interaction of being with the world (Wilson & Foglia, 2011). While the term cognitive might suggest a lack of consideration towards the influence of the social world on sense-making, this is not the case, as:

> 'In the enactive view,... knowledge is constructed: it is constructed by an agent through its sensorimotor interactions with its environment, co-constructed between and within living species through their meaningful interaction with each other. In its most abstract form, knowledge is co-constructed between human individuals in socio-linguistic interactions...Science is a particular form of social knowledge construction...[that] allows us to perceive and predict events beyond our immediate cognitive grasp...and also to construct further, even more powerful scientific knowledge'. (Rhode, 2010, p. 30).

From a methodological perspective, there are five key principles in enactive sense-making, as shown in Table 4 on the following page:

Key principles in enactive sense-making
1. Humans are autonomous beings actively generating a perception of themselves within the world.
2. The nervous system interacts directly with the environment, facilitating perception, and generating meaning.
3. Cognition arises from sensorimotor interactions with the environment, guided by experience. In this way, we learn how to navigate and negotiate the known, and become skilled at processing the unknown.
4. We are encultured and socialised as we learn.
5. To understand the mind, we must investigate human experience.

Table 4. Five premises of enactive cognition (Thompson, 2010, p. 13-14).

Looking at Table 4. we can see that there is similarity between the enactive approach and phenomenology (Husserl, 2012; Merleau-Ponty, 1962), particularly over the view that the mind must constitute objects, but at the same time accepts, that objectives have their own existence outside of mind. Commenting on this, Thompson (2010, p. 15) argued: 'Things show up, as it were, having the features they do, because of how they are disclosed and brought to awareness by the intentional activities of our minds'. Importantly, and while this study is not 'traditional' phenomenology, i.e., analysing lived experience as a pure subjective goal, it does draw on the foundation of phenomenology and links it the natural sciences of biology and mind. In this way, this study may be considered a form of naturalised phenomenology (Zahavi, 2004).

Importantly, enactivism creates an alternative to mind-body dualism by intertwining mind and body within the nature of being, with sense and self, both arising from this process (Burman, 2006). The enactive approach sits between representationalism and solipsism, accounting for how subjectivity and consciousness relate to the brain and body (Thompson, 2010). Broadly speaking, enactivism is a constructivist epistemology, where the individual constructs the world, guided by being in the world (Mutelesi, 2006). As non-sense is a foundation to this process, we will explore this aspect in the following section.

2.4.1.3. Engaging with Non-Sense

As we move through life, we commonly encounter phenomena outside of our perceptual understanding, requiring us to scan potentially relevant mental information, and if necessary, engage in cognitive innovation to bridge gaps of knowledge and make sense of non-sense (Dervin, 1992; Savolainen, 2006). Making sense has been argued as one of the most important aspects of cognition (Cappuccio & Froese, 2014), with claims being made that cognition is itself sense-making (Dibitonto, 2014). If we accept non-sense as the foundation and pervasive background of cognition (Barrett, 2015; Di Paolo, 2014), the presence of non-sense suggests incomplete sense-making (Di Paolo, 2014). Having said this, and for conscious adults, we might wonder whether it is really possible to have no sense about a new experience? As surely, any experience, no matter how non-sensical, can be contextualised against extant models of understanding? Even if this is just at a minor level, such as pattern recognition? Unfortunately, this is an acutely thorny issue, as while our experience of something might give us a rudimentary understanding, it may remain non-sensical, leaving us unable to classify it. Discussing this problem, Barrett (2014, p. 153) argued: 'how can non-sense ever become sense for us, if perception only ever presents the world within the existing structures of our understanding?'. Attempting to answer his own question, Beaton (2014, p. 168) said that during sense-making we can 'still be guided by the outlines of [our] understanding'. Using an analogy, Barrett (2015) depicted sense-making as akin to painting, where inexperienced painters experience greater representational non-sense, in comparison to the master, who has greater physical and mental resources to paint, or make sense. The life experiences people have had, alongside their education, personality traits, hopes and dreams are all a key part of how gaps of knowledge are filled, and sense is made of non-sense (Atwood & Dervin, 1981; Dervin et al., 1980; Dervin, Jacobson & Nilan, 1982; Dervin, Nilan, & Jacobson, 1981; Newby, Nilan & Duvall, 1991). Having said this, and for us to make sense of non-sense, we cannot always seek to interpret new visionary information exclusively within past models, as instead, we must innovate, building on previous understanding, and extending our sense (Weick, 1995).

To help us understand non-sense, I will now detail my ayahuasca experience within this chaotic mental realm. Several years ago, I had visions of single-plane red lattices i.e., 'ball' joints, attached to three 'sticks' in single sheets, as shown in figure 2:

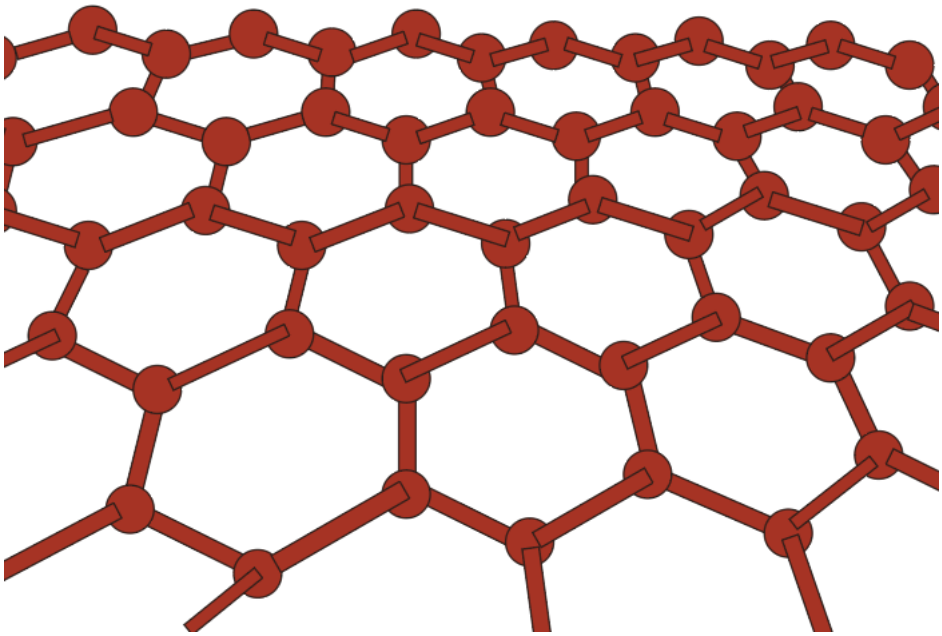

Figure 2. Depiction of a non-sensical vision.

During these visions, I saw structures in my mental space, and while I could easily elucidate and classify colour and structure, I saw no greater meaning. Thus, I experienced and made some sense, but non-sense remained overall. Years of trying to make sense about this structure have failed. My attempts to cycle through extant schematic and linguistic resources still provide no clarity. For example, I am a natural scientist and might be inclined to claim a chemical structure, but even if I do, it has no meaning, and is still non-sensical. Perhaps it is as Depraz (2014) suggests, that non-sense still exists when there is a lack of coherence due to no greater picture or teleological direction, or a failure to innovate sense.

Importantly, experiencing non-sense can be disconcerting, as the more overwhelming the non-sense, the more psychological distress it causes (Depraz, 2014; Dibitonto, 2014). According to Barrett (2015, p. 236): 'This negativity is linked to the fact that as long as non-sense persists, we do not know how to act – we do not know how to "go on from here" – and in this state of paralysis we begin

to doubt our own agency and self-control, and our very sense of self begins to deteriorate'. At the extremes of non-sense, existential terrors never seem far away, and quickly erode our sense of self, our place in the universe, and what we believe the universe to be (Dibitonto, 2014). Within these tempestuous seas of existential non-sense, individuals must make sense, or lose themselves within the unknown, as they are engulfed by incoherence, anxiety, and depression (Barrett, 2015). Having said this, humans are adept at making sense, and in so doing, can mitigate psychological distress and rework it into positive outcomes of greater understanding, coupled with catharsis and joy (González, 2014).

Finally, it is worth noting that non-sense can arise from profound and relatively mundane acts, which create an ambiguity and uncertainty for how to behave. It has been argued that non-sense is particularly troublesome when individuals experience events outside of their expectations, which, in turn, creates an urgency to explain what something is and why it happened (Maitlis, 2005). Not surprisingly, the experience of non-sense, undermines our beliefs about reality, either as something relatively inconsequential that niggles, and is potentially easily forgotten, or something that overwhelms our ability to cope with daily tasks (Dibitonto, 2014). As part of the way we cope with non-sense is through social sense-making, this aspect is examined in the following sub-section.

2.4.2. Social Sense-Making

Humans do not exist in a social vacuum, with the sense we make being influenced by the conversations we have with others and ourselves, real or imagined (Weick, 1995). This is not to suggest that we lack agency in the sense we make, but rather that as we move through life, we are exposed to new ideas, ideologies, philosophies, and ways of being through what others say (Kress, 1985). Broadly speaking, there are several key aspects to how we discursively make sense of non-sense, as shown in Table 5:

Phenomenon	Description
The individual as a social being	The core of discursive sense-making is the individual, and their perceived relationships with others in social settings. Simply speaking, and while making sense is a cognitive act, it is also linguistically developed in conjunction with friends, family, colleagues, and culture in general.
Temporality	When individuals attempt to make sense, they do so in relation to past memories, extant cognitive and linguistic resources, while potentially reflecting on the future (Weick, 1993).
Talking	Speaking to ourselves and others presents ongoing opportunities to re-examine what sense has been made, and to make more fit-for-purpose sense should the need arise.
Non-sense	Chaos, incoherency and misunderstanding continually challenge our models of reality, driving us to explore who we are within this cosmos.
Cognition and 'knowledge'	What sense we make might simply be what we prefer, fit in with expected socio-cultural norms, or even be a more truthful account of reality.

Table 5. Core elements of discursive sense-making.

Importantly, this study draws on the notion that we are not cognitive blank slates, but that what is said can influence how we perceive reality (Rorty, 1992; Machin & Mayr, 2015), which seems to fit well with enactive sense-making as a constructivist epistemology. As such, it can be argued that both language and reality influence each other (Searle, 2015), routed through humans as embodied sense-making agents. Consequently, we must be careful not to assume that language is neutral, or that statements about reality are necessarily innocuous. This can be an acute issue in organisations such as churches (Purchase et al., 2018), which tend to be hegemonic in nature, and easily reorientate how the nature of reality is perceived within their congregation. Of course, and as we might imagine, this is not to suggest that words can change the ontological status of the physical world, but rather, that, depending on socio-cultural norms, how we experience reality may shift (Rorty, 1992). Irrespective of the source of a voice, we must remember that what we think, say, and hear, can all influence what sense we make (Snell, 2002). In other words, even when we try to convince another, we may end up convincing ourselves.

Broadly speaking, humans are not neutral beings when communicating, and instead can be considered *Homo narrans* (Bruner, 1991; Fisher, 1984), creating shared stories of reality through plot devices, including good guys, bad guys, plots, events, expectations, and intentions (Boje, 2015). Disseminating sense through stories can be crucial for creating a shared worldview, implementing norms (Czarniawska, 2004), and reflexively 'permit[ting] nuanced investigation[s] of the extent to which individuals in a work team agree, disagree, and contest understandings' (Brown et al., 2008, p. 1039), and come together as a group (Davies & Harré, 1991). Of course, humans are also encultured beings, embedded with complex social networks, with sense arising from the environment as well as interaction with others. With cognitive and linguistic innovation often being a key part of how sense is given and made, this aspect is explored in the following sub-section.

2.4.2.1. Cognitive and Linguistic Innovation

As we move through life, we continually experience non-sense, which we make sense of through our cognitive and social processes, either adopting or rejecting new forms of knowledge (Rogers, 2003). Materiality, language, and the mental realms are all fertile grounds for exploring newness, but often require schematic and linguistic flexibility on our part, as well as the social, cultural, and organisational freedom to pursue innovative perceptual understanding (Greenhalgh et al., 2004). Thus, when we meet something new, we must account for it, with it being clear that the more incomprehensible and riskier the concept, the less likely that it will be adopted throughout a community (Rogers, 2003). Furthermore, innovations than are harmful are often rejected (Dobbins, Cockerill & Barnsley, 2001), or become stigmatised through the process of adopting new beliefs and practices.

Metaphor is a critical part making sense of newness, with Pierotti (2011, p. 66) stating: 'All intellectual traditions depend on the use of metaphor to model and investigate natural phenomena', with new metaphors being developed, or traditional metaphors being reworked to address new phenomena. The use of metaphor is common throughout numerous arenas of social life, including scientific

and ethnobiological studies, and as Hesse (1974, p. 62) argued, 'scientific understanding, like all human understanding, proceeds by way of providing metaphorical redescriptions of phenomena'. It is also worth considering that Aristotle (2008, p. 1410b) claimed 'Ordinary words convey only what we already know, [and] it is from metaphor that we can best get hold of something new'. Simply, a metaphor is a figure of speech that persuasively tries to link one thing with another, potentially highlighting something hidden, or similarities between things. Metaphors are commonly used in day-to-day life (Drabble, 1998), with Lévi-Strauss (1962) and Whorf (1956) both arguing that metaphors are capable not only of depicting reality, but also shifting how we view it. Expanding on this, Lakoff and Johnson (1980, p. 211) suggest that metaphor is 'one of the most basic mechanisms we have for understanding experience'. Importantly, metaphors are also rhetorical, persuading audiences that an innovative view should be taken as a fact (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). It is through experience that metaphors come into being, and are articulated as innovations are discursively framed, legitimising some and delegitimising others. Within this study, metaphor is a vital part of how sense is made by individuals and their organisations. For example, Shanon (2010) argued that consuming ayahuasca increases metaphoricity, which fits with Freud's thinking (1953) that innovative metaphors help us understand the non-sensical, uncanny and chaotic. Metaphoric innovation is thus a key part of creating and making sense of experience, with Shanon (2010, p. 336) claiming:

> 'In this process, features are not selected out of prior, given semantic sets; rather, new semantic differentiations are made and new semantic features are generated. It is precisely this that makes metaphor cognitively so important – it is one of the most important mechanisms for novelty in cognition'.

In this way, metaphor is not viewed as just a process of selecting from prior experiences, but rather an act of creation to make sense of new experiences. Having said this, there can be profound differences in the way individuals make sense as individuals, and within organisations, with this aspect being examined in the following section.

2.4.2.2. Organisational Sense-Making

Broadly speaking organisations tend to be contested cultural arenas, with multiple competing sense-making models of reality in operation at any time (Currie & Brown, 2003, p. 566). We thus come to see that social sense-making within organisations is a complex act, where different individuals can exert different levels of power (Thurlow & Helms Mills, 2015), for what sense is accepted or rejected (Boje, 2001). From an organisational sense-making perspective, 'power defines what counts as knowledge' (Flyvbjerg, 1991, p. 27) and power is discursively exerted over others as part of sense-making (Bourdieu, 1994). In this way, we must be careful not to assume that all voices carry the same epistemological weight and right to speak about reality (Boje, 2015; Helms Mills, 2003; Helms Mills, Thurlow & Mills, 2010). This is not to suggest that an individual loses their agency, or that their cognitive processes become 'hijacked' by others, but rather that the sense discursively presented within an organisation can be constrained or supported, depending on the extant power structure (Helms Mills, 2003). Discussing this, Thurlow & Helms Mills (2015, p. 247) argued that:

> 'We are still left with a gap in the literature between understandings of individual-level reactions to, and relationships with, change and connections to the broader language of organizational change, including whose stories are being privileged and whose are being ignored, or more simply, what gets enacted in the change process and the use of language and whose choice it is'.

It is increasingly apparent that spiritual and religious discourses are well suited for guiding weaker organisational members into preferred sense (Purchase et al., 2018). This is particularly the case where sense-making models appear to be divinely mandated, requiring future sense-making to follow a prescribed path of concretised doctrinal beliefs. Expanding on this concept, Mills and Murgatroyd (1991, p. 3) stated 'Rules are phenomena whose basic characteristic is that of generally controlling, constraining, guiding and defining social action'. Importantly, Thurlow and Helms Mills (2015) suggest that sense-making and the development and adherence to rules are also part of organisational belonging and whether an individual is at the periphery or top of group hierarchy. A simple example of this

might be how an individual ontologically positions ayahuasca, i.e., as a pharmacological drug or spiritual medicine (Tupper, 2008), and the extent to which other organisation members consider this a discursive act of legitimation or stigmatisation.

For sense to be accepted within an organisation, there are five stages that must be negotiated, including: (1) normalisation, (2) authorisation, (3) rationalisation, (4) moralisation, and (5) narrativisation (van Leeuwen & Wodak, 1999; Vaara & Tienari, 2008). Discussing these categories, Thurlow & Helms Mills (2015, p. 249) argued that:

> 'Normalization is described as a form of authorization whereby events or actions are constructed as normal or natural; authorization refers to legitimation related to the authority of laws, customs or individuals who hold some type of institutional authority; rationalization references actions based upon specific knowledge claims that are accepted as relevant or 'true' in a given context; moralization strategies are constructed by referencing specific value systems; and narrativization refers to the processes of situating the action within a relevant or accepted storytelling framework'.

For individuals entering an organisation, or embracing new activities and ways of being, it is highly likely that extant beliefs and assumptions about self and the universe will be challenged (Hofstede, 2001; Ogbonna & Harris, 1998; Schein, 2004). In such cases, it can be difficult for individuals to embed themselves within an organisation's 'common-sensical stock of knowledge' (Thurlow & Helms Mills, 2015, p. 247). Furthermore, inflexible sense-making models can become a hindrance for how to deal with novel situations, leading to internal confusion, and tensions with other organisation members about what reality is (Osland & Bird, 2000). Where organisational conflicts of sense arise, extant sense models must be negotiated, and new sense made (Ivanova-Gongne, 2015). It has been suggested that the more pluralistic sense-making models are, the greater the repertoire available to engage with uncertainty and to thrive in the unknown (Endicott, Bock & Narvaez, 2003). Problematically though, pluralistic models of the universe and

self can lead to conflicts of sense, particularly between different organisational members who are often vying to concretise their views.

Finally, the acceptability of what sense is made within an organisation often depends on whether individuals perceive themselves as culturally close or distant to each other (Monge & Contractor, 2003). Examining this briefly, we see that positive interactions amongst people are more likely to occur between individuals who view themselves as having similar traits (Byrne, 1971; Turner, 1987). Critically, and as perceived similarity grows, individuals tend to feel more comfortable with each other, reducing communicative barriers, and increasing shared sense-making. Commenting on this, Rogers (2003) indicates that culturally close relationships, identities and sensegiving communications typically result in groups producing similar accounts of self, and how reality is viewed. How we negotiate cultural views of reality is now considered in the following section.

2.4.2.3. Ethnometaphysical Sense-Making

At the deepest level of shared sense-making, we commit ourselves to exploring the cultural basis of how we understand the metaphysical nature of the universe, and our place within it. Simply speaking, 'Ethnometaphysics is the study of how and why human cultures encourage individuals to assume degrees of assenting, dissenting, or neutral attitudinal stances regarding particular claims about the nature of reality' (Blainey, 2010, p. 114). Giving a greater overview of ethnometaphysics, Hallowell (1960, p. 20) argued:

> 'Human beings in whatever culture are provided with cognitive orientation in a cosmos; there is ''order'' and ''reason'' rather than chaos. There are basic premises and principles implied, even if these do not happen to be consciously formulated and articulated by the people themselves. We are confronted with the philosophical implications of their thought, the nature of the world of being as they conceive it. If we pursue the problem deeply enough we soon come

> face to face with a relatively unexplored territory – ethno-metaphysics'.

It is increasingly apparent that both individual and group sense-making is influenced through the distorting lens of culture (Mandler, 1984). As such, this study 'assess[es] what culture is from a metaphysical perspective by seeking to explain how the process of human culture act[s] to shape and maintain metaphysical belief' (Blainey, 2010, p. 117). Problematically, and even though ethnometaphysics has much to offer researchers, it has received relatively little attention (Carter, 1980; Hallowell, 1960; King et al., 2012; Tedlock & Tedlock, 1992; Tooker, 1975; Viveiros De Castro, 2004). This is unfortunate, as ethnometaphysics offers ethnobiologists the opportunity to scientifically explore the fine grain processes of philosophy within life (Bidney, 1995), where the mental realms, mind and consciousness are the substrates of human experience (Blainey, 2010). In so doing, we start to move the lived experience of being out of philosophy departments, and into the inquiry of ethnobiologists (Jackson, 2005).

Reminding ourselves that metaphysics is the part of philosophy that considers fundamental questions related to being, existence and reality (Blackburn, 2016), ethnometaphysics unpacks cultural models of reality used to make sense. Within this arena, common questions include, what is there? And what is it like? These questions can be applied not only to the material parts of reality but also to the immaterial, including the supernatural and divine. Importantly, there is no universally accepted ethnometaphysical sense-making model of the cosmos, and instead, human thinking tends to be enmeshed within a mixture of ethnometaphysical views, which can be contradictory (Stoljar, 2009). At the heart of much industrialised ethnometaphysical incoherence is the ongoing competition between a variety of totalising systems such as science and a variety of religions, all competing to dictate what reality is. When we factor in that most individuals have little training in disciplines such as science, philosophy, or theology etc. we come to see that reality is approached through a myriad of pre-theoretic intuitions (Güzeldere, 1997) idiosyncrasies and personal preferences (Blainey, 2010). Or putting it a different way, we often believe that we understand our world, even when we do not, and erroneously believe that our views are widely shared. Yet, and

having said this, there are some commonalities which tend to generally hold true, such as the propensity to elevate and reify the material (Barušs, 2003), while degrading mental realms, dreams and the supernatural as unreal and fake (Laughlin, 1999; Whorf, 1941). As such, it is not uncommon for individuals to hold personal views regarding beliefs in the otherworldly that are likely to be backgrounded in social life, due to the fear of being stigmatised.

Even though most people tend to have poorly systematised views of reality, should their expectations of what is real falter, they can easily find themselves slipping into cosmology episodes, with this aspect being considered in the following sub-section.

2.4.2.4. Cosmological Crises

For a conscious human to exist in the world is to have a cosmology, no matter how well understood it is (Weick, 1985). Simply speaking, a cosmology is taken 'from a branch of metaphysical philosophy that addresses issues of time, space, change, and contingency relative to the fundamental phenomena of the universe and one's place in it', (Orton & O'Grady, 2016, p. 7). Or as Charlton (2007, p. 714) argued, 'A cosmology is an account of the universe as it presents itself to the human mind… not just the facts. In order to fulfil its psychological function a cosmology needs to be poetic, symbolic, inspiring a sense of awe and mystery'. Importantly, cosmologies can be a mixture of religious, philosophical, and scientific ideas (Ellis, 2006), requiring little commitment to objectivity or truth, only to provide coherence to the individual making sense of their world (Campbell, 2002). For an individual to reach a working cosmology, they must have some understanding of themselves as conscious beings within a society embedded within the universe (Campbell, 2004). Problematically for heavily industrialised nations, cosmologies are often unsystematised and skewed towards physicalism (Gowdy et al., 2013). This has left Europeans for example, struggling to make sense of themselves as spiritual and religious beings in a knowable universe, which often seems to come easier to 'shamans, mystics, poets and philosophers' (Charlton, 2007, p. 716). Intriguingly, this has led to Europeans being drawn to exotic belief systems (Apud & Romani, 2017), including cultures surrounding psychoactive plants such as the birch tree

(*Betula sp.*), psychedelic mushrooms (*Amanita muscaria*), shelf fungus (*Fomes fomentarius*) (Hajicek-Dobberstein, 1995), and ayahuasca (Shanon, 2010), amongst others.

While we all have our own cosmological views of the universe, should someone or something cripple our extant sense-making models (Weick, 1993, p. 633), we can experience cosmology episodes, leaving us feeling 'that the universe is no longer a rational, orderly system'. According to Weick (1985, p. 51) '[r]epresentations of events normally hang together sensibly within the set of assumptions that have given them life and constitute a "cosmos" rather than its opposite, a "chaos"'. Importantly, not all shocks result in cosmology episodes, with lower order events doing little to challenge how we view ourselves within the universe, and tending to be resolved quickly (Lanzara, 1999). However, and at the higher end, individuals suddenly experience a loss of meaning (Weick, 1993) and become trapped in an unknowable universe (Terwiesch, Loch & Meyer, 2002), i.e., a cosmology episode.

'The study of cosmology episodes directs explicit attention to the integral role of human spirituality during catastrophic events' where we ask 'what now is my role in the universe?', 'what now am I able to do to respond to the event?', and 'what now is my different role in the universe?' (Orton & O'Grady, 2016, p. 227). We often try to resolve cosmology episodes by embedding ourselves within preferred teleologies to remake sense of our journey through life (Lancaster & Palframan, 2009). Critically, there is growing recognition that adverse events such as cosmology episodes lead people towards spiritual views of themselves (Pargament & Mahoney, 2002). Discussing this, Bray (2010, p. 33) stated that during turbulence, people 'engage in meaning-making activities that might include having to negotiate difficult existential and spiritual questions that permit the construction of a new and coherent life narrative'. As such, individuals develop resilience to cosmology episodes 'to re-establish meaning after it has collapsed so the universe… seems like a rational orderly system…' (Simonsen, 2013, p. 20). It is possible that building resilience creates future tolerances to unexpected events, toning down their importance, and allowing individuals to avoid crises of sense and self (Dunbar & Garud, 2009; Krems, 1995; Weick, 1998). The five processes for how individuals experience and negotiate cosmology episodes are shown in Table 6:

Stage	Description
Anticipating	Prior to the episode, individuals have low levels of information about an event, and are typically unprepared for it, lacking cognitive and linguistic resources to mitigate the impending crisis. Commenting on this issue, Bosma, Chia & Fouweather (2016, p. 20-21) argued: 'Our sense-making is both dependent upon and constrained by the pre-existing monologues available to us. This is our language of the past. But at any time, novel stimuli may puncture our web of meaning, thereby creating a crisis of interpretation, or a cosmology episode. Such events leave us needing to express and communicate things not catered for by established formal language. In such circumstances we instinctively turn to dialogue to experiment and to create our language of the future'.
Sense-losing	Encountering a trigger event, anticipation moves to a loss of sense, meaning and self. The length of sense-losing is dependent upon the time taken to create new potentials of being, where loss is turned to creation (Roux-Dufort, 2007).
Improvising	There are three stages within improvising, including absence, mood and being open (Holt & Cornelissen, 2014). Absence of sense increases the awareness of what the cosmological episode is, where mood is the rationalisation of the experience, and finally, being open is the ability and willingness to examine assumptions about the event (O'Grady & Richards, 2010).
Sense-remaking	In sense-remaking, individuals must 'ask themselves questions about the meanings and origins' of their cosmology episodes (Roux-Dufort, 2007, p. 110), and in so doing commit to resolving their crises.
Renewing	This final stage sees the implementation of strategies to exit their cosmology episodes and view life through a new sense-making lens. It is not uncommon for profoundly negative cosmology episodes to increase spirituality, religiosity and a belief in God(s) (Douglas & O'Grady, 2016).

Table 6. Cosmology episode resilience strategies.

Troublingly, it is difficult to predict when an individual might experience a cosmology episode, which has led most scholars to examine these events retrospectively, relying on participant memories rather than direct observation and ongoing discussion during a crisis (Littlefield, Sellnow & Attansey, 2006; Muhren, Van Den Eede & Van de Walle, 2009). Having said this and drawing on the notion

that ayahuasca can trigger cosmology episodes, and having witnessed these aspects in play with the participants, this study attempts to create a more encompassing overview. To my knowledge, this is the first study to have taken this approach with cosmology episodes.

As making self is also a critical act of making sense (Cappuccio & Froese, 2014), the following section examines how sense is made of self.

2.4.3. Making Sense of Ourselves

How we make sense of ourselves within the world can be addressed in many ways, and in this study, the lens of identity-based self-making is used (Brown, 2014). Within sense-making, our identities are formed through an ongoing process of uncovering who we are and aspire to be, influenced by our environment, situations, and people we meet. This is coupled with how we make sense of ourselves in relation to others, irrespective of whether they are real or imagined (Lawler, 2013). It is increasingly apparent that making sense is making self (Helms Mills, 2003; Helms Mills and Mills, 2009; Mills and Helms Mills, 2004). Or as Thurlow and Helms Mills (2015, p. 248) argued, 'Simply put the actors in this 'story' enact an identity that is ongoing and subject to continuous change, depending on influences on the sense-making process'. Importantly, identity can be defined as 'the meanings that individuals attach reflexively to themselves and develop and sustain through processes of social interaction' (Brown, 2014, p.23). Identity work is composed of the activities undertaken by individuals seeking to achieve their desired notions of themselves (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003). Thus, for individuals engaged in self-making, it is not just a question of asking who am I? But rather asking how can I become or maintain who I want to be? Considering the complexity of our daily lives, it is not surprising that our self-making is carried out in relation to what we do, who we meet, and the organisational roles and professions undertaken (Pratt, 1998). While self-identity is 'the individual's own notion of who and what they are' (Watson, 2008, p.131), social identity is constrained within what is socially plausible and available in context of an 'individual's own notion of who and what they are' (Watson, 2008, p.131). As we might imagine, there is often a complex

interplay between personal preferences and what is accepted within any social group.

Not surprisingly, social self-making is shaped and constrained through the discursive resources available within the organisations people exist within (Essers & Benschop, 2007; Watson, 2008), where resources are drawn on relative to what is perceived as legitimate to a social identity within an organisation. While there may be preferred discursive resources and identity aspects to utilise, it must be remembered that the regulation or homogenisation of any resource is never absolute, enabling some discretion on the part of the individual undertaking self-making (Watson, 2008). Identity work is thus not free from extant social structures and discourses, yet, and metaphorically speaking, social actors are not rudderless while navigating a discursive sea of identity work, as instead they maintain their agency as they remake themselves (Wright, Nyberg & Grant, 2012).

Within religious organisations some discourses may be preferred over others, and for example, for the legitimacy and power they bring to the speaker (Herriot & Scott-Jackson, 2002; Hjelm, 2013). Within this contested arena of self, it is clear that there has been a paucity of research into how powerful master narratives (Lyotard, 1979) influence identity work (Stutts, 2020). Furthermore, how spirit-based sensegivers can empower individuals to concretise and reify their views of self, enabling them to have an 'unchallengeable' right to speak about reality (Bassett, 2012; Delaney & Hastie, 2007). As religious identities are a key part of how sense is made in this study, the following section examines this aspect of self.

2.4.3.1. Religious Self-Making

While religious ways of being continue to be explored within a variety of organisational settings (Delaney & Hastie, 2007), relatively little is known about religious self-making within the context of ayahuasca sense-making. As such, we will now try to develop a deeper understanding of religion and what it means not only to be religious but to claim a religious identity. As a starting point, we should remind ourselves that even within a modern world, that at least 80 % of the world

is religious (Pew Center, 2015), indicating that in Europe, and the UK, that science did not 'kill' religion as is so often said (Saad, 2018). Instead, however, religious forms of thinking are undergoing intense changes and innovations (Partridge, 2005), shifting away from the dominant religion and culture of Christianity (Moffat & Yoo, 2019). As Christianity loses its power over the collective UK mind (Brown, 2009; Coulson, 1996), new religious ways of thinking are increasingly taking hold (Gunton, 2010), with new stories being told of creation myths, saints/sinners, promises of salvation, and utopian/dystopian futures (Plantinga, 2012; Wayne, 1994). We thus come to see that irrespective of the truth of any particular religion, that humans tend to be skilled religious innovators, creating/discovering deities and ritual practices to meet the chaotic challenges in their daily lives (Luhrmann, 2012; Shortt, 2016).

Broadly speaking, religion is a cognitive and cultural approach to reality 'that shapes the entirety of life and thought' (Lindbeck, 2009, p. 33). Often being subjective and experiential in nature, religion embraces the notion that 'all duties [are undertaken] as divine commands' (Kant, 1960, p.142), with the ultimate goal being to restore order to personal chaos (Hallowell, 1960), in this world or the next. While certainly a contested claim, arguments have been made that religious thinking may well be a fundamental part of being human (Abraham, 2010; Lindbeck, 2009; Oakes, 2011; Partridge, 2005). Or as Berger (1999, p.13) highlighted: 'The religious impulse… has been a perennial feature of humanity…It would require something close to a mutation of the species to extinguish this impulse for good'.

Building on our understanding of self-making from the previous section, we can examine this aspect from a religious perspective, which is to say that 'Identity is the mythical story you and I create which helps explain our 'behaviors, experiences, and relationships' (Reimer & Dueck, 2012, p. 252). Through this lens, we are all embedded within a rich cosmic teleological journey towards salvation (Abraham, 2010). In this way our stories are ones of introspection, self-discovery and a desire to embrace the divine or demonic (Shanon, 2010). For those engaged in religious self-making, the question is ultimately, what we think we can achieve for ourselves. Is it serenity? Salvation? Or a complete transformation of self to become more

magical? Or even divine? Broadly speaking, spectacular desires are not uncommon within religious self-making, and are often orientated towards developing otherworldly powers, and beliefs that the universe is full of spirits and guided by supernatural forces (Lindeman & Aarnio, 2007). For those experiencing altered states of consciousness and perceptual perturbations, i.e., hallucinations or visions, otherworldly experiences can facilitate the belief that the individual has an empowered magical identity, transcending the limitations of reality (Powell, 2017; Taves, 2016). Drawing on such notions, reality becomes highly malleable, where thoughts, words and actions reshape the world, providing that the magic is 'right' (Curry, 1999; Zusne & Jones, 1989). Beliefs attached to religious identities tend to include the notion that 'symbols have power', (2) 'psychic phenomena are real', (3) 'actions have remote consequences', (4) 'the world is alive and thoughtful', (5) 'souls are eternal', (6) 'everything occurs for a reason', and (7) 'objects carry essences' (Sierra, Hyman & Turri, 2018, p. 5-6). This is not to suggest that all prior mundane beliefs are eradicated from such individuals, but rather that a complex personal and social negotiation must take place regarding what it is to be human in this universe. Having said this, we must remember that not all identities are condoned, with some being condemned as socially undesirable. This can be an acute issue within religious self-making, particularly where claims are made that congregations are following the one true religion (Wainwright, 2005). As this is a key part of how sense is made, the following section examines this aspect.

2.4.3.2. The Stigmatised Self

As we move through life, and engage in new situations, meet new people, and recontextualise ourselves, we are exposed to different views of the world, which can be harmful to our practices, beliefs, and notions of being. Within itself, any action, belief or utterance might invoke a negative perception by others, with this issue being more prevalent when social norms are poorly understood. Commenting on this, Goffman (1963) argued that when there is a discrepancy between norms, it is common for stigmatisation to occur, leading those breaching social and organisational rules to be ostracised. Simply speaking, stigmatisation is a form of otherness, staining the individual as socially unwelcome (Jones et al., 1984).

Expanding on this, Crocker and Major (1998, p. 505) argued that 'stigmatized individuals possess (or are believed to possess) some attribute, or characteristic, that conveys a social identity that is devalued in a particular social context'. For individuals experiencing stigma, there is often a propensity to be subject to negative stereotyping and discrimination (Link & Phelan, 2001). In such circumstances, individuals can be moved to the periphery of society, or be ostracised from organisations and groups, as a form of social cleansing (Crocker & Major, 1989). Such issues can be particularly troublesome when we join a new organisation, and when new norms are poorly understood, limiting our ability to fit in. Importantly, stigmatisation is rarely uniform or static throughout social life, with cultural views on what is worthy of stigma varying throughout groups, organisations, and over time (Parker and Aggleton, 2003). Not surprisingly, individuals can feel overwhelmed by stigma, leading to a lack of wellbeing, as their identities shift, and they try to make a new place in the world for themselves (Beech, 2011).

Critically, and while our identities can be a source of our stigmatisation and otherness, they are also a means to push back, and re-orientate wider notions of ourselves to more preferred outcomes (Castells, 1997). This transitioning process requires past and future notions of self to be negotiated, as individuals try to reorientate wider views of how they are perceived (Townley, Beech & McKinlay, 2009). Broadly speaking, and within the ritualistic consumption of ayahuasca, little is known about how individuals ward off stigmatisation from negative cultural perceptions of ayahuasca as an illicit substance (Tupper, 2008), and within religious organisations in general. It is clear, however, that ayahuasca users may try to conceal their consumption of this unusual brew, in an attempt to showcase more socially acceptable characteristics within their wider societies (Bourguignon et al, 2006). When we consider that ayahuasca organisations tend to be spiritual and religious in nature (Shanon, 2010), the overt identification with the otherworldly can easily lead individuals into stigmatisation and degradation (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Hogg & Terry, 2000) within more materialist societies. From a sense-making perspective, the religious identities we claim are not free from church doctrines, as we may find ourselves constrained in how we position ourselves and the sense we make. This was made particularly clear in an earlier study, which showed that ayahuasca organisations can be hegemonic allowing little deviation in how the

nature of the universe and humanity are positioned (Dean, 2019). The challenge for individuals consuming ayahuasca within religious organisations is thus to mitigate stigma and avoid psychological harm from being socially devalued (Martire et al, 2000). This is at least the case if they wish to develop a sense of belonging and well-being from a supportive religious environment that facilitates positive sense- and self-making (Poll & Smith, 2003).

After discussing several foundational aspects within this literature review, the following section showcases a conceptual framework overviewing how sense and self are made.

2.4.3.3. Conceptual Framework Driving this Study

As we have seen so far, there are several key components related to how sense is made by individuals facing varying degrees of non-sense. Fundamental to sense-making is self-making, and our ability to reimagine who we think we are, and effectively claim a new notion of self within our social groups (Helms Mills, 2003; Helms Mills and Mills, 2009). Yet, and having said this, there is no guarantee that we can adequately make sense of our experiences or even remake ourselves in line with our desires, which can potentially leave sense- and self-making to be completed at a later date (Dibitonto, 2014). Critically though, and if non-sense arises at the extreme end of the spectrum, cosmology episodes can enmesh the individual, leaving them in a largely unknowable universe, bereft of sense, as their extant models of reality collapse (Simonsen, 2013). Figure 3 presents an overview of the sense-making process, highlighting key aspects and how they relate to each other:

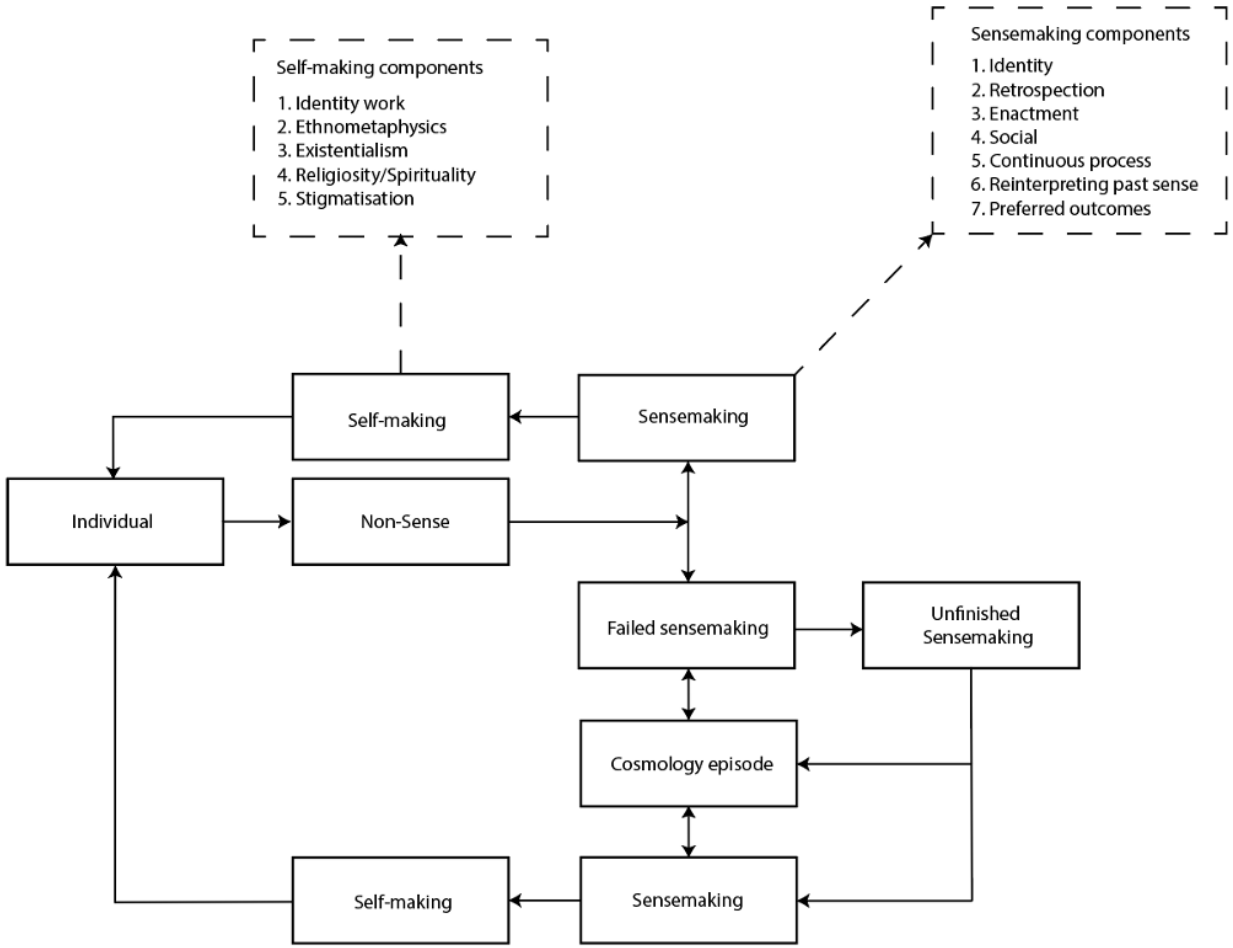

Figure 3. Conceptual sense-making framework.

Examining figure 3, we come to see that sense-making can be cyclical, involving short or prolonged stages of uncertainty via failed and unfinished sense-making as sense and self are sought against experience and the potential to innovate new meaning.

Drawing this section to a close, the following sections highlight the salient knowledge gaps in relation to the extant literature.

2.5. Knowledge Gaps Driving this Study

Overviewing the extant literature, it is clear that there are still key research gaps to be addressed in relation to the research question: *how is sense made of ayahuasca non-sense?* In particular, three salient research gaps have been identified, which help answer the research question, including:

1. *What constitutes ayahuasca non-sense?*
2. *How is sense made of non-sense? And*
3. *How is sense made of self?*

Critically, and as the research findings chapters will show, core themes from these gaps often intertwine and support each other.

2.5.1. Knowledge Gap I: What Constitutes Ayahuasca Non-Sense

The first research gap will examine ayahuasca non-sense arising from visions and hallucinations. While it is commonly accepted that non-sense pervades daily life to varying degrees, it is increasingly recognised that gaining access to non-sense rich participant experiences is rare and not without challenge (Cappuccio & Froese, 2014). This has meant that we have a poor understanding of what constitutes non-sense, as well as how it is processed, or not, as the case may be (Depraz, 2014). Reflecting on the extant sense-making literature, non-sense is often treated as an abstract concept, with ongoing attempts to sidestep any meaningful attempt to

address what it is (Dibitonto, 2014). Not surprisingly, little attention has been paid to what it is, under what conditions it arises, and how individuals perceive and negotiate it (González, 2014). However, and using ayahuasca experiences as a contextual lens to explore non-sense, we know that it arises when this brew is consumed, but also, that it can be perceived within intense visions and hallucinations. Furthermore, and using ayahuasca as a means to generate non-sense, we move beyond prior studies that had tended to limit their gaze to non-sense arising from extreme physical events such as physical disasters (Muhren, Van Den Eede & Van de Walle, 2009). In so doing, this study aimed to capture the fuller process of sense-making including anticipating non-sense, how it emerges, and is processed, rather than only assessing the latter stage, as has been common with prior studies. Within itself, one of the greatest barriers to our understanding of non-sense has always been to access sufficiently large enough samples of individuals consciously experiencing overt non-sense, which this study achieved. Finally, we should remind ourselves that psychoactives potentially offer us a new research lens to better understand non-sense as a critical part of human consciousness.

2.5.2. Knowledge Gap II: How Sense is made of Non-Sense

The second research gap explores how sense is made of non-sense, taking sense-making to be an embodied, cognitive, and social act, examined through what is said and done. When we reflect on previous sense-making studies, there has been a propensity to fragment sense-making, often separating cognitive, embodied, and discursive forms (Dervin, 1992; Cappuccio & Froese, 2014; Weick, 1995). In this study however, the human is holistically centralised as an embodied cognitive and social agent, allowing us to better explore the multimodal nature of ayahuasca sense-making. When we consider that ayahuasca has an intense influence on the body (McKenna, 2004), and with bodily functions frequently changing the nature of non-sensical visions and hallucinations (Talin & Sanabria, 2017), it is critical to position sense-making as a naturalised phenomenon to account for these aspects.

With acute non-sense eroding sense-making models of reality and self, ayahuasca appears to be an ideal context to explore how sense is made within turbulent, chaotic,

and incoherent visual environments. Furthermore, examining ayahuasca, allows us to explore how individuals learn to develop resilience strategies against cosmology episodes and existential terrors, that psychologically traumatise and leave individuals lost in an unknowable universe (Orton & O'Grady, 2016). Prior to this study, very little attention had been paid to cosmology episodes, which is unfortunate, as human existence is replete with shocking and destabilising events often occurring outside of physical disasters. When we consider that cosmology episodes 'disrupt national, community, organizational, team, and individual cosmologies' we come to see that they 'are powerful laboratories for exploring the dynamics of meaning-losing and meaning-making' (Orton & O'Grady, 2016, p. 227). Again though, ayahuasca presents an opportunity to see what is normally hidden, revealing sense-making processes within the visual state, even if they are poorly understood by the individuals experiencing them.

Reflecting on the sense-making strategies at play within this study, we come to see that religion is a key part of making sense, with all three ayahuasca organisations being deeply religious in nature. While religious sense-making is increasingly recognised as highly persuasive (Purchase et al., 2018), it must be noted that little was known about how sense is given within otherworldly organisations, and how sense is codified into religious doctrines and mandated as pervasive common-sense. Finally, and with ayahuasca being an otherworldly experience (Shanon, 2010), this study adds to our understanding of how making sense of ayahuasca typically involves breaking mundane sense-making models of the universe and building new ethnometaphysical views to view the universe as a spiritual endeavour, orientated towards a teleology of personal salvation.

2.5.3. Knowledge Gap III: How Sense is made of Self

The third and last research gap to be examined is how sense is made of self, in relation to non-sensical ayahuasca experiences. As a starting point, it must be noted that there is increasing support for viewing sense- and self-making as simultaneous and reciprocal acts (Helms Mills, 2003). Or putting it more simply, when we make sense, we make ourselves, and vice versa. Yet, and having said this, making self

tends to be poorly understood, and typically explored outside of sense-making (Lawler, 2013). This has left a large research gap, which this study attempts to address. Critically though, this study deviates from more traditional views of self-making, as the participants were seeking spectacular changes of self and sense, often beyond what is accepted within a material reality. It is worth noting, however, that there has been much debate about the limits of self-making, and whether our identities are best viewed as predominantly constrained by materiality or are better considered as mentally and socially constructed. With this being a highly religious sample, who were developing in-depth supernatural cosmologies, we should not be surprised that they sought genuine magical capabilities, in line with what they could imagine. Again, though, little is known about this within the extant literature, or how rapid changes of sense can influence the adoption of magical beliefs and leave individuals to background the mundane. Finally, and even though many studies have addressed the shaman identity (Arvigo, Epstein & Yaquinto, 1994; Taussig, 1989), and Europeans wanting to become shamans, this is the first study to have considered entire church congregations wanting to become otherworldly shamans. As will become apparent, for those who background the material aspects of life in favour of the supernatural, ongoing conflicts of sense and self, are likely when encountering secular-materialist European common sense.

Chapter 3. Methodology

3.1. Introduction

This chapter details the practical and theoretical aspects of this ethnography, through the sections: (1) 'research question, aims and objectives', (2) 'methodology', (3) 'preparing and handling the data', and (4) the 'summary'. Due to the complexity of attempting to explicate the mental realms of ayahuasca, great care is taken to highlight methodological limitations and areas of concern, and just as importantly, how measures were put in place to tackle such aspects.

3.2. Research Question, Aims and Objectives

Reminding ourselves of the knowledge gap identified from the extant literature, the questing driving this work is:

How is sense made of ayahuasca non-sense?

Helping answer the research question, the research aim is:

To better understand how sense is made of non-sense within UK-based ayahuasca churches.

Unpacking the aim, four objectives were identified, including:

1. *To understand the formation of ayahuasca churches and their motivations;*
2. *To elucidate to what constitutes ayahuasca non-sense;*
3. *To draw out how sense is made of ayahuasca non-sense; and*
4. *To understand how individuals make sense of themselves within their churches.*

3.3. Methodology

Throughout this section, the underlying methodological aspects related to this study are detailed, alongside how the ethnography was designed, implemented, and data analysed. Consideration is also given to the trustworthiness of the findings, and how the participants were an ongoing part of the research process. The next sub-section starts by exploring the ethics required to run this study.

3.3.1. Ethical Considerations

As might be expected in a study of this nature, ethical considerations were paramount to safeguard the physical, mental, and spiritual wellbeing of all participants, and myself. This was alongside taking steps to protect community knowledge, religious beliefs, and practices (Brush and Stabinsky 1995; Gollin et al. 1993; von Lewinski 2008; Whitt 2009). Thus, and before fieldwork started, an in-depth critical reflection was undertaken to highlight salient ethical issues, with the following five questions guiding this process (Gilmore & Eshbaugh, 2011, p. 52):

1. ‘Have you received proper permission to conduct your research?
2. Have you thought about and incorporated local needs, challenges and priorities into the research project?
3. Who is benefitting from the research and how are collaborating communities and individuals being compensated?
4. How will the results of the research project be shared and used?
5. Are the interests of collaborating communities and individuals being acknowledged and protected when disseminating research results?’

In order to protect all concerned parties (Palau, 2013), these five points were used alongside the guidelines of: (1) International Society of Ethnobiology code of ethics (ISE 2006, 2008), (II) American Anthropological Association code of ethics (AAA 2012), (III) Association of Social Anthropologists ethical guidelines (ASA 2019), and (IV) the ethical guidelines of the School of Anthropology and Conservation at the University of Kent (UKC 2009). As a starting point, I used prior informed

consent with all participants, detailing the purpose of this study, explaining who I am, and what my role would be within this study. Explicit details were provided about how data would be collected, stored, and used, coupled with potential benefits, detriments, and outputs from this study. Assurances were given that all participants would have the right to withdraw at any time, without the need for explanation, and that research findings pertaining to them would be returned upon their request. Due to the need to analyse conversations and behavioural practices, permission was sought to record what would be said and done, but with the proviso that all identities and raw data would be private, anonymous, and confidential. At all times, participants were free to ask for a conversation not to be recorded, but in practice, this rarely happened.

A key part of developing trust was through the use of a 'research statement' (Appendix A) which was disseminated to all potential participants prior to this study, detailing the premise of this study. This was coupled with an ongoing invitation for any individual to discuss any part of this study, alongside continuous opportunities to reflexively explore research findings. Paramount to these considerations was the requirement to mitigate any negative impact from my interactions with these three ayahuasca churches. For example, and throughout this ethnography, I tried to avoid making value judgements on church beliefs or practices (Hycner, 1999), and worked to act in a professional and friendly manner while becoming a functioning member of these communities.

As ethnobiological knowledge is increasingly considered a commodity worthy of moral and legal protection (Whitt, 2009), all collected data was stored in compliance with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). Furthermore, it was agreed that research findings would be disseminated within the communities that they were produced within, while allowing for publications in academic journals and conferences (Gilmore & Eshbaugh, 2011). Not only did this make these communities key stakeholders within knowledge production, it also safeguarded their developing spiritual and religious traditions, while creating reflexive feedback on this study. Practically, and due to the sensitivity of experiences from the ayahuasca state, opportunities were made to discuss findings and interpretations privately, and within the wider churches. Finally, it was agreed

that all church members would be provided with copies of this thesis and any forthcoming publications.

3.3.2. Covid-19

With this study falling within the global pandemic of Covid-19, it is important that I detail pertinent aspects related to this viral outbreak. Being in the UK, this was a critical issue, due to the relatively high infection rates observed in 2020 and beginning of 2021. Fortunately, all data collected during the ethnography was carried out prior to Covid-19 being detected in the UK, meaning that no provisions were necessary throughout that time. However, and having said this, the thesis writing up stage took place through the main viral spread in 2020 and start of 2021. As such, strict precautions were taken and meticulously adhered to, to limit the spread of infection to myself, the participants, or any members of staff at Kent University. In practice, this meant that I barriered myself at all times, and more than met local and national governmental advice (https://www.stockton.gov.uk/our-people/coronavirus-covid-19/what-are-the-rules-in-stockton-on-tees/). Alongside this, I moved all communication with the participants and Kent University online via a netnography, which allowed frequent contact, but removed the risk of physically transmitting this pathogen. Importantly, contact with the participants was relatively low during this period, with advice generally being sought online over interpretative issues related to previous data collection. As such, the impact of Covid-19 on the production of this thesis was negligible. Finally, it is worth noting that the presence of Covid-19 limited the ability of these churches to carry out ayahuasca ceremonies, due to the sharing this common sacrament being a potential risk and means to spread the virus. Intriguingly, and while these churches generally rejected the material basis of disease transmission, they claimed to follow governmental guidance.

3.3.3. Case Studies

This study was designed and built around three syncretic ayahuasca churches in the North of England, with each church being considered a separate case study. According to Meredith (1998), case studies are well suited to ethnographic studies, as they can both rely on natural methods of data collection, while also allowing participant observation. With this empirical study focusing on real-time events, as well as memories, and speculations of the future, it was judged to sit inside a case study approach (Yin, 2009).

Broadly speaking, there is a growing trend to using case studies in sense-making research, as they offer several methods of data collection, and ongoing reflexivity on the part of the researcher. For example, I recently used this approach in examining ayahuasca tourist sense-making, and how individuals negotiate material existence and the immaterial spirit worlds (Dean, 2018, 2019). While case studies tend to be adept at exploring complex mental phenomena, they also enable more mundane avenues to be considered related to behavioural practices (Frecksa, 2008). As such, case studies have come to be seen as versatile methodological tools, examining multiple individuals, organisations as well as complex behaviours (Kaplan & Orlikowski, 2013). Having said this, it is clear that a case study is not a laboratory experiment, as we rarely have much control over variables within case studies, particularly in organisations and participants engaged in social life. Within itself though, this can be a good thing, enabling a more natural approach to data collection, where participants can behave more freely, albeit within the presence of a researcher (Yin, 2009). Perhaps the most important aspect that the researcher can control is which organisations to work within, and thereby, which sample to select to answer the research question. As this is a critical area, the following section examines sampling, as well as theoretical aspects perceived relevant to which organisations were engaged with.

3.3.4. Sampling

What sample to select is an ongoing concern in all empirical research, with great care and attention required to select individuals and organisations capable of answering the research question (Bryman & Bell, 2011). Considering that ayahuasca use is highly niche within the UK, the samples selected are non-probabilistic, aiming to be pragmatic and purposeful, and providing access to highly relevant cases for how sense is made through ayahuasca consumption (Baker & Edwards, 2012; Wengraf, 2004). Taking this approach raises the following questions though about how representative the sample is? And how many participants within each sample are needed? (Bryman & Bell, 2011). Addressing the appropriateness and generalisability of the sample first, all participants selected in this study considered themselves well-versed in ayahuasca preparation, consumption, and the nature of this psychoactive. Or more simply, and accepting some deficiencies of their knowledge, all participants regarded themselves 'experts', or on the road to becoming such. Attempting to address generalisability (Wood & Kroger, 2000), the issue comes down to how much we can transfer findings from one study sample to a wider population, and whether it is limited by context (Hedrick et al., 1993). For example, is this study purely about ayahuasca in UK churches? Or does it have wider applicability in different social groups, cultures and with other psychedelics? Broadly speaking, and while the phenomenon of interest should stay true to itself, at times, findings can be applied where there is a similar context or population (Meredith, 1998). Having said this, caution must of course be taken for how far findings from one study can be generalised, typically requiring consideration at the end of the first study. The point is to make sure that the initial work on one phenomenon is robust enough to allow the potential to generalise more broadly.

Finally, and having overviewed sampling, the next stage explains how organisations of interest were located.

3.3.4.1. Locating Organisations of Interest

As we might imagine, the ability to run this empirical study was predicated on my ability to locate and gain meaningful access to ayahuasca organisations who could help answer the research question. Critically, it is worth remembering that while the UK prohibits the extraction of the psychoactive component DMT, it allows the consumption of this brew. Having said this, the legality of a psychoactive does not mean that it is socially acceptable or non-stigmatised (Siff, 2015). This being the case, we should not be surprised that users tend to consume this brew covertly. Coupled with ayahuasca not being native to the UK (Ott, 1994), and with limited marketing, we come to see that locating such communities was not without challenge. This is not to say that ayahuasca consumption is outside of common reach, but rather that it tends to sit outside of the gaze of everyday social life.

For general ease, my initial attempts to find ayahuasca communities were online, which revealed lone practitioners and micro-communities throughout the UK. Unfortunately, these potential participants were deemed unsuitable due to being low in number and spread over large distances. This being the case, I sought help from previously established contacts related to my former tourism, emphasising my desire to meet larger and geographically closer samples. While this was clearly a fraught time, I was mindful of the need to set robust standards for an organisation to be included, using the following practical criteria:

1. The potential for each organisation to help answer the research question;
2. Being geographically accessible with good transport links;
3. Reasonable costs associated with travel and sustenance;
4. Willingness of the ayahuasca organisation to support the collection of meaningful data;
5. Low risk to the ayahuasca organisation from running this study;
6. Ability of organisations to become stakeholders in the research process; and
7. The potential to run this study to completion.

Aided by my pre-existing contacts, three potential UK-based ayahuasca organisations were located in the North of England, and eventually became the

focus of this study. Not surprisingly, initial feedback from my contacts suggested that all three organisations had serious concerns about taking part in this study, fearing that their religious beliefs and practices would be exposed, coupled with the risk of being contaminated by a spiritually unclean outsider. Listening to these concerns, I was reminded of my time as an ayahuasca tourist, where every day mundane acts can be seen as having profound magical consequences. For example, I remember being in an Ecuadorian ayahuasca church, where not covering one's mouth while yawning was considered a viable source of demonic infection and possession, necessitating temporary ostracisation from the wider group for individuals (un)intentionally carrying out this act. While perhaps a relatively unique spiritual belief, it emphasises how otherworldly organisations can develop phantasmagorical sense-making systems, which are often poorly understood by outsiders. With this in mind, I meditated at length on the three church's concerns, working towards how these aspects could be managed, as detailed in the following section.

3.3.4.2 Addressing Participant Concerns

In order to better understand and address participant concerns, I invited representatives from each organisation to discuss the nature of this ethnography and how we might mitigate these issues. Deciding where to meet was a relatively simple affair, and was determined by the participants, with two meetings taking place in participant's houses and the third in a quiet cafe. In all cases, only one participant from each organisation attended, with meetings functioning as icebreakers, allowing us to introduce ourselves, and to discuss how I might interact with these churches, collect and analyse data, ensure confidentiality and anonymity, and finally, produce a thesis and publications. The main concerns from these initial and subsequent meetings were codified in Table 7:

Participant	Organisation	Theme	Comment
Craig	A	Confidentiality and anonymity.	'I don't want anyone finding out that we are doing this'.
Craig	A	The ontological status of ayahuasca.	'Ayahuasca is a spiritual medicine and not a drug'.
Ian	B	Stigmatising views of ayahuasca users.	'We are not heroin addicts. We don't do dirty drugs here'. .
Cody	C	The ontological status of the ayahuasca experience.	'What we see in our visions and dreams are real and not just some fake mumbo jumbo'.
Cody	C	Group belonging, stigmatisation and otherness.	'Ayahuasca is spiritually pure, and we can't have people bringing darkness here'.

Table 7. Participant concerns about undertaking this study.

While addressing anxieties was an important aspect of gaining access to these organisations, it was not my intention to produce unduly favourable or false answers just to facilitate data collection. Thus, and in order to showcase the integrity of this process, I disseminated a research statement to all church members, detailing key aspects that they could expect should they agree to take part in this study (Appendix A). This was alongside engaging in in-depth discussions about how the participants would be protected from wider public and academic scrutiny through anonymity and confidentiality. Importantly, it seemed that the participants had assumed that their personal details including their actual names and contact details would be revealed. However, and upon clarifying that this would not be the case, all participants appeared more relaxed about allowing this study. Furthermore, and after much discussion, it was agreed that basic demographic information would be provided in this thesis, including professional occupation, education, sex and age. Having said this, there were still tensions, particularly about how I viewed ayahuasca, i.e., as a spiritual medicine or drug (Siff, 2015), and whether I was spiritually clean, and might contaminate their churches, as highlighted in my conversation with Bailey (Church B):

Author: As you know, I have a wide research background, and have worked on a variety of pharmaceutical and plant-based projects but have also spent time examining spirits. And I am here now, if you will allow it, to understand how you make sense of ayahuasca. It is important that I'm honest with you, which might mean that we disagree at times over how we view the world. This being said, you are always free to ask me questions about my views. Broadly speaking though, I view ayahuasca as having a pharmacological component that drives spiritual and religious experiences, that many say involves spirits and different realms. To what extent these things are real or not real is difficult for me to say and depends on what you mean by real. But as a researcher, I am required to be open. I could speak as a scientist, and about how the pharmacology works, or as a theologian, considering the nature of spirit beings and their relationship to the material universe. I think the point I'm trying to make is that I'm not here to mock you, deride your views, or organisational beliefs. My role really is to understand what you all think and why.

Bailey: Sounds good to me, and yeah I'm pretty happy with what you've said. Life isn't perfect and nobody expects you to be. Mmm, there is a tricky issue we need to talk about though. And don't be offended [laughs]. Are you clean? Spiritually? It isn't that we are saying you aren't clean, but we do wonder how clean you are. Our spiritual health is very important to us, and anyone from outside might destroy everything we have worked for. We don't want you to bring an evil spirit with you, even unintentionally. [Pause]. You've taken ayahuasca, and you know this. Mmm, if you'll let us purify you this might work. Yes, I'll have a chat with the others as purifying you might work and see what they say. I can't promise anything though.

Author: We used to do purification ceremonies in South America all the time. If you are happy with that then I am too. Respecting your practices is important, so let me know how I can help.

Throughout these discussions, I reinforced that I was not there to make moral or ontological judgements, and that my main goal was to understand how the participants made sense of ayahuasca. Coupled with this, I explained that having been an ayahuasca tourist, that I was sensitive to church concerns about spiritual cleanliness, and was comfortable undertaking purification ceremonies via chanting, meditation, and sacred prayers, if need be. Importantly, and by agreeing to these organisational suggestions, I was invited to undertake three ethnographic studies in these different churches.

3.3.4.3. The Samples

Three UK-based syncretic ayahuasca churches were selected for this study, giving access to a total of forty-nine participants. While it was possible to try to expand the sample via snowballing, further organisations were an unreasonable travelling distance, limiting my ability to meaningfully collect data. However, and reminding ourselves that ayahuasca use is rare in the UK, three churches with forty-nine participants was believed to capture a high number of UK organisations. Table 8 shows the anonymised sample that this study was built around, whereas Table 9 details church information. Importantly, no participant had been met prior to this study.

ID	Church	Gender /Age	Nationality	Education	Profession	Raised a cultural Christian	Beliefs prior to ayahuasca	No. of ceremonies taken	Used other psychoactives	Previous ayahuasca use	No. of years drinking ayahuasca at the start of ethnography
1. Kristi	A	F, 29	British	BSc IT	Teacher	Yes	Spiritual	100 - 200	No	No	6
2. William	A	M, 42	British	BA Art	Consultant	Yes	Pagan	100 - 200	No	No	9
3. Frank	A	M, 50	British	BSc Maths	Marketer	Yes	Christian	100 - 200	No	Yes	4
4. Caius	A	M, 31	British	MSc Biology	Biologist	Yes	Wiccan	100 - 200	No	No	7
5. Kristi	A	F, 34	British	MA Marketing	Marketer	Yes	Wiccan	100 - 200	No	No	5
6. Vincent	A	M, 49	British	BA Literature	Teacher	Yes	Spiritual	100 - 200	Yes	No	4
7. Craig	A	M, 21	British	BA English	Librarian	Yes	Spiritual	100 - 200	No	Yes	3
8. Deborah	A	F, 32	British	BA Humanities	Tutor	Yes	Pagan	100 - 200	No	Yes	3
9. Sylvia	A	F, 65	British	School	Retired	Yes	New Age	100 - 200	No	Yes	3
10. Benny	A	M, 44	British	School	Retail	Yes	New Age	100 - 200	No	Yes	3
11. Felix	A	M, 38	British	PhD Biology	Researcher	Yes	Spiritual	100 - 200	No	Yes	3
12. Steph	B	M, 37	British	BSc Physics	Consultant	Yes	Spiritual	200 - 300	Yes	Yes	7
13. Ian	B	M, 40	British	School	Retail	Yes	Pagan	100 - 200	No	Yes	9
14. Daniel	B	M, 29	British	BA Economics	Manager	Yes	Spiritual	200 - 300	No	Yes	11
15. Andre	B	M, 27	British	BSc IT	IT support	Yes	New Age	200 - 300	No	Yes	10
16. Julius	B	M, 43	British	BA Geography	Consultant	Yes	Christian	300 - 400	No	Yes	9
17. Carly	B	F, 50	British	BA Sociology	Retail	Yes	Spiritual	300 - 400	No	Yes	9
18. Anita	B	F, 27	British	BSc Marketing	Unemployed	Yes	Spiritual	300 – 400	No	Yes	9
19. Seb	B	M, 24	British	BSc Science	Manager	Yes	Spiritual	200 – 300	No	Yes	12
20. JJ	B	M, 39	British	School	Electrician	Yes	Spiritual	100 – 200	No	Yes	11
21. Stanley	B	M, 61	British	MA Art	Retired	Yes	Spiritual	200 – 300	No	Yes	8
22. Mark	B	M, 44	British	BA Humanities	Consultant	Yes	Spiritual	200 – 300	No	Yes	9
23. Elijah	B	M, 36	British	PhD Biology	Academic	Yes	New Age	100 – 200	No	Yes	7
24. Bailey	B	F, 42	British	School	Artist	Yes	Wiccan	300 – 400	No	Yes	11
25. Ash	B	M, 25	British	BA Languages	Consultant	Yes	Pagan	200 - 300	No	Yes	12
26. Sue	B	F, 52	British	BSc Biology	Tutor	Yes	Spiritual	200 – 300	No	Yes	11
27. Ken	B	M, 38	British	BA Art	Artist	Yes	Spiritual	300 – 400	No	No	9

28. Gary	C	M, 65	British	School	Retired	Yes	New Age	1000 +	Yes	Yes	14
29. Mary	C	F, 59	British	School	Retired	Yes	Wiccan	1000 +	No	Yes	16
30. Shelley	C	F, 40	British	BA Marketing	Marketer	Yes	Spiritual	1000 +	Yes	No	22
31. Nat	C	F, 22	British	MA Literature	Consultant	Yes	New Age	1000 +	No	Yes	19
32. Brandi	C	F, 32	British	BA Linguistics	Translator	Yes	New Age	1000 +	No	Yes	16
33. Sally	C	F, 29	British	MBA	Director	Yes	Pagan	1000 +	No	Yes	14
34. Cody	C	M, 28	British	BSc Maths	Teacher	Yes	Christian	1000 +	No	No	11
35. Alex	C	M, 36	British	School	Unemployed	Yes	Spiritual	1000 +	No	No	19
36. Chris	C	M, 43	British	School	Plumber	Yes	Spiritual	1000 +	No	Yes	24
37. Nick	C	M, 30	British	PhD IT	Academic	Yes	Spiritual	1000 +	No	Yes	18
38. Terry	C	M, 68	British	BA French	Retired	Yes	Pagan	1000 +	No	Yes	15
39. Joe	C	M, 55	British	BA Sociology	Retired	Yes	Christian	200 - 300	No	Yes	3
40. Rick	C	M, 48	British	MSc Physics	Teacher	Yes	Spiritual	1000 +	No	Yes	16
41. Margo	C	F, 35	British	MSc Biology	Student	Yes	Spiritual	1000 +	No	Yes	14
42. Stuart	C	M, 62	British	School	Retired	Yes	Spiritual	1000 +	No	Yes	17
43. Heidi	C	F, 31	British	MA Classics	Linguist	Yes	Spiritual	1000 +	No	Yes	13
44. Ray	C	M, 39	British	BA Languages	Translator	Yes	New Age	1000 +	No	Yes	14
45. Evi	C	F, 44	British	MSc Business	Consultant	Yes	New Age	100 - 200	No	Yes	4
46. Robin	C	M, 47	British	MA Marketing	Marketer	Yes	Spiritual	1000 +	No	Yes	20
47. April	C	F, 30	British	PhD Biology	Academic	Yes	New Age	1000 +	No	Yes	14
48. Irini	C	F, 27	British	MA German	Teacher	Yes	Pagan	1000 +	No	No	17
49. Peter	C	M, 24	British	BA Art	Artist	Yes	Pagan	1000 +	No	No	13

Table 8. Participant information.

Table 8 shows the participants appearing to fit within the average profile of European ayahuasca users being white, middle-class, relatively well educated and seeking novel ways to develop spiritual gnosis outside of traditional religions (Dawson, 2013). While all participants claimed to have had a variety of faiths before consuming ayahuasca, all had attended Protestant or Catholic churches as children and received Christian instruction as part of their school education. As such, this sample is considered culturally Christian, where sense about the universe and self is in part scaffolded through Christian religion and theology (Bialecki, Haynes & Robbins, 2008; Moffat & Yoo, 2019). Importantly, the sample was 63 % male and 37 % female, and 100 % British, all living in the North of England and having English as their first language. Table 9 shows basic information about the churches.

Church	No. of members	Age (years)	Growth & preparation of plants	Plants used
A	11	6	Yes, Yes	*Banisteriopsis caapi* and *Psychotria viridis*.
B	16	7	Yes, Yes	*Banisteriopsis caapi* and *Psychotria viridis*.
C	22	9	Yes, Yes	*Banisteriopsis caapi* and *Psychotria viridis*.

Table 9. Church information.

Overviewing Table 8 and 9 the three churches are similar in nature, and all use the same plants to make ayahuasca, albeit with varied preparation methods. Due to the perceived sacrosanct nature of ayahuasca preparation, all churches requested that I not report on the rituals associated with preparation, or how the plants were sourced.

3.3.5. Ethnographic Fieldwork

In an attempt to meet the research goals of this study, ethnographic fieldwork was undertaken using participant observation, including semi-structured interviews, informal conversations and participant storytelling, alongside drawing on my own

autoethnographic experiences as an ayahuasca tourist, and keeping field notes where appropriate (Lofland & Lofland, 1995; McCracken, 1988; Schouten & McAlexander & Koenig, 2007; Stewart, 1998). Problematically though, and as Bositis (1988, p. 333) argued: 'there may be no type of research design more complex, and therefore more misunderstood, than participant observation', in part due to it being 'a shorthand for a set of methods' (Whyte, 1979). Undertaking a myriad of ethnographic approaches was considered vital for drawing out the fine-grain processes of how the participants made sense and self within the ayahuasca state (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Reissman, 2008; Whiteman & Cooper, 2011). Discussing the ethnographic approach, Geertz (1973) argued that it is:

> '[M]icroscopic, involves thick description, it is interpretive, the ethnographer 'inscribes' social discourse, writing it down. Further the essential task of theory building is not to codify abstract regularities but to make thick description possible, not to generalize across cases but to generalize within them'.

Importantly, and through an ethnographic lens, it is possible to simultaneously study the material and mental aspects of life, and in so doing, create a single holistic overview (Patton, 1990; Tesch, 1990). Methodologically, ethnography is a relatively unique approach to data collection, allowing scientific study of participants, but also enabling an understanding of how communities perceive themselves (Dewan, 2018). At the heart of this process is the requirement for researchers to spend time with participants, experiencing their lives, not as an abstract concept, but rather through living it with them (Brewer, 2000). While it is possible for criticisms to be made that this methodological stance is unscientific, it must be noted that the ethnographer can still collect and analyse data in line with the scientific method (Aunger, 1995). Broadly speaking, this ethnographic study takes a critical stance, exploring how power is a foundation of culture and how sense is made through it.

In carrying out participant research we have to accept that there is a balancing act between being able to observe participant life 'down a microscope' as the objectivist scientist, and the need to interact, experience and ask questions.

Importantly, ethnographers can take advantage of the multimodal nature of ethnographies, shifting between methods, being reflexive and directly engaging with community experts (Hammersley, 2019). Throughout this ethnography, I functioned as a 'participant-as-observer' (Gold. 1958, p. 217), being overt about my role as a researcher, yet also participating in daily church life wherever possible.

In practical terms, I spent one year moving between three ayahuasca churches based in England, spending time with forty-nine participants who frequently consumed ayahuasca, with much of the ethnographies being recorded in Chapter 4. Importantly, my decision to use an ethnographic approach was based on several factors, as I will now discuss. The first, and perhaps most pertinent was the challenge of collecting data. When we consider that ayahuasca sense-making is often ongoing, it seemed highly unlikely that interviews would fully capture this process, as there is much reappraisal after initial sense has been made. Furthermore, and reflecting on my time as a tourist, it often took much time for individuals to feel comfortable and confident to speak about their personal and traumatic ayahuasca experiences. As such, I felt that this ethnography would provide the foundation to build in-depth relationships and to demonstrate myself as a researcher who could be spoken to and trusted. Problematically, a failure to establish closeness or trust had the potential to produce shallow results, which only touched the surface of sense- and self-making. Having said all of this, I acknowledged that while an ethnography could produce more meaningful and insightful data, that this would come at the expense of large amounts of time engaging in daily church activities, and analysing data not always obviously relevant. However, when we engage in sense-making studies, great care must be taken not to dismiss seemingly unimportant statements, beliefs, or behaviours, as any word, or short discourse could reveal much about how individuals position themselves within the world. Troublingly, this is not without an intense mental and analytical burden for ethnographers, who must stay alert, continually searching for meaning, while not drawing false conclusions. As the methods of analysis are foundations to this study, the following two sections explain their key aspects.

3.3.6. VoIP Ethnography

While the main ethnographic stage was carried out without hindrance, it must be noted that the writing up stage was during the Covid-19 outbreak, which limited my ability to speak to the participants in person. As such, and with an ongoing need for potential clarification of sense- and self-making issues from these three churches, I moved to digital communication, using VoIP (Voice over Internet Protocol) technologies such as Skype, FaceTime, WhatsApp, alongside e-mail, text and phone (Fetterman, 2010; Iacono, Symonds & Brown, 2016). Although Covid-19 prevented the variety of ethnographic resources that had been available during the earlier physical ethnographic stage, it must be recognised that VoIP ethnographies are an invaluable tool for assessing how people who have used psychedelics make sense and continue to transform themselves (Barratt et al., 2016; Kruithof et al., 2015; Marcus, 2009; Masson & Bancroft, 2018). Thus, and upon completing the physical ethnographic stage, and in the several months of writing up this thesis, I was able to stay in close contact with the participants, also allowing them to raise concerns or provide further information, whenever they felt inclined to do so. Within itself, this additional contact time was a means of checking my assumptions, but also expanded data collection, often beyond the remit of this study. For example, and while it had not been my intention to draw out how ayahuasca acts as a spiritual medicine, the Covid-19 outbreak meant that this became an increasingly important issue for the participants. With regards to this study, this was a fruitful time, as the participants were frequently seeking contact to discuss how ayahuasca might act as a global panacea (Drug Science, 2020), more efficient and efficacious than any materialist medicine. As we might expect, such notions were highly informative for how these individuals viewed the nature of health disease, and the human body.

As the methods of analysis are foundations to this study, the following two sections explain their key aspects.

3.3.7. Content Analysis

How we analyse recorded data is a critical issue, and for those interested in frequencies of participant talk and behaviour, Content Analysis (CA) is usually the first method undertaken (Neuendorf, 2016). CA is a 'scientific tool' focused on 'making replicable and valid inferences' from what is said or written (Krippendorf, 2013, p. 24). As a method, CA functions on the basis that not only is speech potentially polyphonic, but that different interpretations can result in varied meanings, necessitating a robust and auditable analysis (Lacy et al., 2019). Over past decades, CA has become widespread, focusing on elucidating linguistic and cognitive structures within social life (Neuendorf, 2016). Yet, and even though well suited to the mundane, CA can also be used to explicate the thornier elements of life, including myths, folktales, and riddles (Goodenough, 1972). Although CA is predominantly quantitative, it is also qualitative in nature, as 'all reading of texts is qualitative [at some level], even where certain characteristics of a text are later converted into numbers' (Krippendorf, 2013, p. 22). This is not to negate quantification, or to erode the objective aspects of this method, but rather to say that CA is dually quantitative and qualitative, alongside objective and subjective. The question thus becomes, how far can CA step beyond literal meanings and explore deeper interpretations? Table 10 helps us address this issue:

Features of Content Analysis
1.'Texts are not objective – that is, no reader-independent-qualities'.
2. 'Texts do not have single meanings that could be "found," "identified," "described" for what they are, or correlated with their sources'.
3. 'The meanings invoked by texts need not be shared'.
4. 'Meanings (contents) speak to something other than the given texts, even where convention suggests that messages "contain" them or texts "have" them'.
5. 'Texts have meanings relative to particular contexts, discourses or purposes'.
6. 'The nature of text demands that content analysts draw specific inferences from a body of texts to their chosen context – from print to what the printed matter means to particular users, from how analysts regard a body of texts to how selected audiences are affected by those texts, from available data to unobserved phenomena'.

Table 10. The six features of CA (Krippendorf, 2013, p. 28-30).

As with other arenas of applied linguistics, content analysts must continually reflect upon their research questions, while highlighting the importance of emerging themes through counting discursive frequencies and exploring potential meanings against emic knowledge and extant literature (Kottak, 2006). Due to the high reliance on frequency measurements within this method, CA is often viewed as a place to start analysis, where textual frequencies are highlighted, and more nuanced linguistic methods are subsequently used to highlight aspects such as power.

3.3.8. Critical Discourse Analysis

Methodologically CDA is not that dissimilar to participant-observation, in that both require the researcher to subjectively engage with the study, rejecting detachment, while actively constructing and negotiating meaning with participants (Potter & Wetherell, 1995a). In recent years, there has been much interest in unpacking how power influences what sense is made (Caldas-Coulthard, 1997; Fairclough, 1989; Kress, 1985; Van Dijk, 1991; Van Leeuwen, 1996; Wodak, 1989). Using CDA can help us understand how language and linguistic features are used to create meaning and persuade others to think in a certain way (Machin & Mayr, 2015). CDA has a foundation within critical linguistics (Fowler et al., 1979), which focuses on how language and grammar can be used as ideological instruments, to background some models of reality and foreground others (Machin & Mayr, 2015). Viewing language as a form of social practice (Hodge & Kress, 1988), what is said can naturalise powerful views and frame them as common-sense (Machin & Mayr, 2015). This is particularly the case with religious organisational doctrines, where those with elevated positions can re-orientate church sense to meet their own ethnometaphysical preferences (Purchase et al., 2018). Taking this view, CDA studies 'how power relations are exercised and negotiated in discourse' (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997, p. 272), which is particularly pertinent within organisational life.

CDA departs from more traditional DA where the focus is often to describe and detail linguistics features as CDA is more concerned with how and why these features are produced, while elucidating the goals they serve (Machin & Mayr, 2015). Practically, CDA often shines an analytical spotlight to highlight obscure

details and power relations in the formation of knowledge (Fairclough, 1989). As such, what we say reveals much about our beliefs and views of reality (Foucault, 1974), where words become ontological statements (Schalley, 2019), and discursive resources can either reify or erode sense and self (Foucault, 1974). An example of this discursive act can be found with the term ayahuasca, which suggests a drug (Dobkin de Rios 1994), hallucinogen (Nichols 2004), psychedelic (Osmond 1957) or entheogen (Ruck et al., 1979) indicating in the former terms a chemical experience, or in the latter a route to genuine spiritual gnosis. For the CDA scholar, language is not just about communication or persuasion, but a means to discursively unpack how we view reality (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997; Kress, 2010). Drawing this overview of CA and CDA to a close, the following section moves on and considers how the data was analysed.

3.4. Preparing and Handling the Data

This section examines the data, detailing how it was worked and analysed in relation to the ethnography. As a starting point, consideration is made of how the data was transcribed, followed by how CA and CDA were used to interrogate ayahuasca non-sense, sense- and self-making. Finally, my attention turns to how we can trust the findings from these methods.

3.4.1. Transcribing the data

Spending approximately one year interacting with three ayahuasca churches created ongoing opportunities to examine and record participant behaviours and talk. To aid in the collection of data, and where feasible, all conversations were recorded by Dictaphone, with further notes being made by myself as a means to further understand what was happening and why. Having said this, there were limits to what could be recorded, with all churches prohibiting Dictaphone usage during ayahuasca ceremonies. Furthermore, and out of politeness, participants were always asked if they would mind their conversations being recorded, with all participants being free to request no recording.

Not surprisingly, working with three ayahuasca churches led to copious amounts of data being recorded, with conversations and interviews lasting from minutes to hours, alongside field notes from each church. After data was recorded, transcription was started on the same day, with a draft produced no more than a day afterwards (Eisenhardt, 1989). As might be expected from undertaking an in-depth ethnography, there were limits to what could be transcribed. Having said this, and taking a holistic approach, what was perceived to be important was recorded. For example, signs of distress, anger, laughter, pauses, broken words, and body language shifts were all seen as highly relevant (Bavelas, 1990). At all times, my main concern was recording the meanings of the participants, and where appropriate, my responses, thoughts, and feelings. Where I faced uncertainty over meaning, I asked the participants to explain their words or actions. Importantly, this was greatly aided by the initial transcriptions taking place within twenty-four hours after data collection.

After transcribing the data, CA was carried out, followed by CDA. From these analyses, sense was unpacked at the individual and organisational level, examining how emerging data answered the research question, if at all.

3.4.2. Undertaking CA

Being the first stage of working with the data, CA sought to understand the frequency and relevance of themes of direct relevance to the research question, with Table 11 showing the procedural elements carried out:

Number	Procedural Suggestions
1	'Unitizing: relying on definitions of relevant data' to create units of meaning.
2	'Sampling: relying on sampling plans'.
3	'Recording/coding: relying on coding instructions'.
4	'Reducing data to manageable representations: relying on established statistical techniques or other methods for summarizing or simplifying data'.
5	'Abductively inferring contextual phenomena: relying on established analytical constructs or presumed models or the chosen context as warrants'. In other words, comparing emerging data with emic and etic understanding (Kottak, 2006).
6	'Narrating the answer to the research question: relying on narrative traditions or discursive conventions established within the discipline of the content analyst'.

Table 11. Procedural suggestions for CA (Krippendorf, 2013, p. 84).

Examining Table 11, the first four stages focused on data making. Elucidating these aspects, the first stage pulled together and made distinctions within texts, highlighting what is of interest while backgrounding potential noise. As might be expected, great care was taken, as what is considered noise may later turn out to be of particular importance. Creating units of meaning enabled single words of relevance to be drawn out and counted, all the way up to entire sentences and paragraphs. The second stage of 'sampling' limited the number of units, creating manageability, while conceptually seeking to represent the phenomenon of interest. Great care was again taken to protect what was critical to the research question, while stripping away redundant themes. The third stage of recording/coding provided not only the original recordings and written notes from interactions with participants, but also provided a methodological path for others to see. In other words, data was collected, as well as being made available as an audit trail, while showing how it was coded. The fourth stage further reduced the data, particularly where multiple in-depth interactions were recorded and transcribed. The fifth stage made abductive inferences about the contextual aspects of the phenomenon and moved the analysis beyond the data, while warranting drew out greater meaning in relation to the research question. Finally, and in the sixth stage, narration was undertaken to consider the results in context to the literature, to start to build a

picture of how individuals and groups construct their relevant sense-orientated views of the universe and themselves (Halliday, 1978).

3.4.3. Undertaking CDA

Procedurally, CDA occurred after transcription and CA (Potter & Wetherell, 1987), as a means to better understand emerging themes. As previously mentioned, CDA is more subjective than CA, with knowledge and perceptual understanding of the phenomena being used to guide the analysis and production of findings (van den Hoonaard, 1997), as highlighted in Table 12:

Step-by-step guide
1. Upon reading the text, reflect on how it is being read, the style of reading being deployed and how different ways of reading can influence knowing.
2. Be mindful of 'obvious' surface-based readings. Even if incorrect, we must record our thought processes in analysis to capture an audit trail to explain the how and why of decision-making.
3. While meanings may be literal, show great caution in positioning everything in this way. Nuanced reading at different levels might draw out more accurate findings.
4. Even though our focus should be on what was said, and done, we must not forget the negative, i.e., what was not said and done. If field notes have been taken, looking at multimodalities may help contextualise what happened.
5. Remember that playing with meaning making can be an insightful way to get to the 'truth' of the matter. Practically, therefore, speculate and imagine different synonyms and phrasing.
6. Examine the structure of the text, and how language performs specific functions. Furthermore, and with interlocutors often showing linguistic nuance, the relationship between structure and function may vary throughout the text.
7. While the participant and analyst will no doubt have their interpretations, the role of the analyst is to orientate the findings towards reality.
8. The more deeply you embed yourself within the text and phenomena of interest, the more informative the results will become.

Table 12. CDA processes (Wood & Kroger, 2000).

Following the suggestions in Table 12, initial CDA coding revealed discursive themes and frequencies, as detailed in Appendix B, allowing more detailed coding in Appendix C. Finally, Appendix D shows a fuller account of the CDA process.

Importantly, CDA focused on explicating the 'dialogical struggle… of a particular discourse…' (Phillips & Hardy, 2002, p. 25), where some views of the universe and self are foregrounded and others are backgrounded (Phillips & Hardy, 2002). The role of the analyst is not to pass judgement or favour any particular ethnometaphysical stance, but rather to reveal what individuals think about reality, and how they discursively and behaviourally seek to achieve their goals (Titscher et al., 2000). For myself as the analyst, this led to an ongoing cycle of data interpretation, with emerging meanings being contextualised against personal knowledge, the literature, and texts (Meyer, 2001). Within this approach, were three key considerations, including, (1) the topic/content, (2) the strategies, and (3) the linguistic means and forms of realisation. In the first aspect, a distinction was made between the different semantic areas being examined (de Cillia, 1999). The second aspect focused on the 'more or less accurate and more or less intentional plans of practices adopted by particular social, political, psychological or linguistic aim[s]' (Wodak, 2001, p. 73). The third aspect examined how individuals sought to realise their goals through lexical units and strategies, by reifying certain aspects of sense-making while eroding others.

Within these churches, much attention was paid to power and what was considered plausible sense-making (Helms Mills, Thurlow & Mills., 2010; Thurlow & Helms Mills, 2015). As Helms Mills (2003) argued, power and plausibility are a pervasive aspect of organisational life, and sense-making must take this into account. In taking this approach, I drew on the notion that formative contexts (Unger, 2004) shape organisational rules (Mills & Murgatroyd, 1991), beliefs and practices (Rostis, 2010), constraining what sense is plausible within any community, and preferencing certain ethnometaphysical perspectives (Thurlow and Helms Mills, 2015). Discussing this Mills and Murgatroyd (1991, p. 3) argued that 'Rules are phenomena whose basic characteristic is that of generally controlling, constraining, guiding and defining social action'. Importantly, plausibility can be linked to legitimacy and power, where some outcomes are more preferred than others

(Thurlow & Helms Mills, 2015). As Yue and Mills (2008, p. 71) argued: 'Plausibility extends beyond immediately observable phenomena; it is an attempt to fit together the evidence available, thereby completing a puzzle despite having only some of the puzzle pieces at hand'. Completing a puzzle, may well be a contested process, with different versions of sense competing, and being preferred at different levels by individuals, and collectively as churches.

For sense to be accepted within an organisation, it must be seen as legitimate, with common-sense being the accepted view of any particular phenomenon. There are five stages of how organisational sense is legitimised, including (1) normalisation, (2) authorisation, (3) rationalisation, (4) moralisation and, (5) narritivisation (van Leeuwen & Wodak, 1999; Vaara & Tienari, 2008). Discussing this, Thurlow and Helms Mills (2015, p. 247) argued that:

> 'Normalization is described as a form of authorization whereby events or actions are constructed as normal or natural; authorization refers to legitimation related to the authority of laws, customs or individuals who hold some type of institutional authority; rationalization references actions based upon specific knowledge claims that are accepted as relevant or 'true' in a given context; moralization strategies are constructed by referencing specific value systems; and narrativization refers to the processes of situating the action within a relevant or accepted storytelling framework'.

This framework was used as the basis for understanding notions of power and how sense was made by individuals and by their churches. The following example text is given from Rick (Church C) which shows a brief example of how sense-making was discerned against these five categories:

> I was never sure about taking ayahuasca, as some say it is a drug, and some say it is a medicine. Being with like-minded people on a spiritual path helped me though. It empowered me to make a decision, and if you think about it, ayahuasca is plants, not a drug. It

> is getting back in touch with nature, and more than anything else, it helped me to start a journey towards making a better me.

Examining this participant comment against the five categories of legitimation within sense-making (van Leeuwen & Wodak, 1999; Vaara & Tienari, 2008), we see the participant claim to have had doubts about ayahuasca, which can be linked to how sense should be made. 'Being with like-minded people' appears to have normalised ayahuasca use, with authorisation to view ayahuasca as a 'medicine' coming from the organisation, and participant, leading to ayahuasca being rationalised as 'plants, not a drug'. Moralisation comes from 'getting back in touch with nature' and being on a 'spiritual path', as part of narrativisation where the participant was on 'a journey totowards making a better me'. Further sense-orientated aspects can be unpacked from this example text, and related to other texts, and can raise questions about who promoted such views in this organisation, and what discursive tools they used to facilitate the primacy of a certain form of sense.

3.4.4. Validation, Reliability and Warranting

CA is a positivist method, often argued as replicable and reliable, and as such, scientific (Kaplan & Goldsen, 1965). The goal of the content analyst is to produce reliable data, in an objective sense, where the procedure is considered trustworthy 'regardless of the circumstances of its implementation' (Krippendorf, 2013, p. 267). It is noteworthy however, that reliability does not necessarily mean validity, as while reliability can be considered 'truth', validity can be viewed as 'quality' (Krippendorf, 2013, p. 329). Importantly, there are three types of validity, including, (1) face validity 'Being obviously true, sensible, plausible', (2) social validity 'Addressing important social issues, contributing to public debates', and (3) empirical validity i.e. 'The degree to which available evidence and established theory support intermediate stages of a research process and its results' (Krippendorf, 2013, p. 334). Face validity is achieved through focusing on reading recorded data, and explicating mean from the text to the social phenomenon. Social validity is 'the degree to which the content analysis categories created by the researchers have relevance and meaning beyond an academic audience' (Riffe et

al., 1998, p. 137) and to the communities themselves. As might be expected, social validity occurs through dissemination of data and findings, and taking feedback from the communities where data was collected. Critically, this stage foregrounds participant voices, and can allow new interpretations to be made, alongside driving new research questions. The final form of validity is empirical, also known as 'internal validity' (Campbell, 1957), which as Krippendorf (2013, p. 331) argued:

> '[I]s the degree to which available evidence and established theory support various stages of a research process, the degree to which specific inferences withstand the challenges of additional data, of the findings of other research efforts, of evidence encountered in the domain of the researcher's research question, or of criticism based on observations, experiments, or measurements as opposed to logic or process'.

Exploring the trustworthiness and generalisability of CDA, it must be noted that analysts work to create an overt understanding of how they worked the data and warranted their claims (Wood & Kroger, 2000). Through this perspective, findings are not simply discovered like an external artefact, but are instead unpacked, elucidated, and warranted through ongoing meditation. Within CDA, warranting is the process by which the methodology is explained, showcasing how, and why, findings were arrived at (Rosenthal & Rosnow, 1991). While sitting outside of positivism, this approach opens the door for multiple representations of reality to be explored, which can be advantageous when examining the mental realms. As such, traditional outliers are included in the process of warranting and are avenues for further exploration of the phenomenon of interest.

Throughout these different stages I embraced 'reflexive pragmatism' (Alvesson, 2003, p. 14), which necessitated a continuous assessment of how I was handling the data and findings, alongside potential varying interpretations of emergent themes. Being the ethnographer, my extant beliefs were paramount, particularly for how they might influence data collection and analysis. In turn, this led to multiple interpretations of the data, and an attempt to draw out foundational ethnometaphysical concepts of participant and church sense and self. To this end, I

frequently sought help from the study participants, who, as experts, worked to clarify my suggested findings using within-method triangulation (Denzin, 1970). Not surprisingly, this often led to re-interpretations of suggested findings, and nuanced vignettes being written up to help produce a coherent overview (Humphreys, 2005).

3.5. Summary

Throughout this chapter, the ethnographic methodology was discussed as it related to the underlying theoretical and practical aspects of carrying out this study. Key aspects were explored relating to how the study was designed, implemented, and analysed, alongside the potential trustworthiness of data, and how it was disseminated to the communities involved in data production. Having examined the methodology, the next chapter details the findings starting with the nature of the ayahuasca churches.

Chapter 4. The Ayahuasca Churches

4.1. Introduction

In this chapter I explore the three UK-based ayahuasca churches that made up this study's sample. This was achieved through drawing out how the forty-nine participants positioned their churches during this one-year ethnography. Methodologically, and like the following three findings chapters, this chapter was derived from the use of CA and CDA, as detailed in the previous chapter. As a starting point, I examine 'entering church life' and how this was a time for me of adjusting to new organisational environments. This is alongside unexpectedly reflecting on my previous ayahuasca tourism and how this impacted on the initial parts of this study. Moving on, consideration is shown to 'the nature of these churches', with details provided for their physicality, and how they dual functioned as places of supernatural worship as well as facilitating more mundane church life. With ayahuasca consumption in the UK being a relatively niche religious act, I also explore the participant 'motivations for forming ayahuasca churches'. In so doing, I reveal the mundane and otherworldly drivers for these participants to form 'a new religion', outside of the gaze of more traditional shamanic practices and extant social norms. Finally, my attention turns to the procedural elements of these 'ayahuasca ceremonies', explicating the how and why of salient practices, alongside how I integrated myself into these ceremonies, and challenges from not drinking this sacred brew.

4.1.1. Entering Church Life

As might be expected, starting an ethnography is often a fraught time for the researcher and participants alike, who must work together to build bridges of understanding and facilitate the sharing of sense. Reflecting on my entrance into these churches, I was particularly mindful of the need to potentially acclimatise to multiple new ways of viewing oneself and the universe. Furthermore, how the participants might need to accommodate a newcomer, and negotiate views not

commonly found within their canons. Therefore, and throughout this period, it seemed unwise to assume that my previous ayahuasca experiences had left me with adequate sense-making models to easily understand what I would see and hear. This being the case, I remained open to the possibility that my initial sense-making might be deficient or misguided, requiring time to more efficaciously understand how participants and their churches understood the world, themselves and processed non-sense into sense. While I was keen not to prejudge these samples, I was acutely aware that magically minded individuals tend to regulate undesirable speech, on the basis that words can easily influence reality and future outcomes (Curry, 1999; Zusne & Jones, 1989). As such, it seemed likely that my time in these churches would be an ongoing act of negotiating the sacred and profane, with social othering never being far away for those breaching accepted organisational rules.

Reflecting on this period, it was clear that I was apprehensive about starting the ethnography, with memories of my past ayahuasca experiences frequently arising. Strangely, this was something I had not particularly prepared for, as naively I had previously bracketed my personal concerns, which, in turn, had left me exposed to increased tensions at the start of this ethnography. This being the case, my initial church interactions often triggered intense memories of previous hallucinations, visions, and experiences with formerly encountered tourists and shamans. Intriguingly, and while I had not thought of these ayahuasca experiences for some time, it became apparent that my previous sense-making had not been as complete as I had imagined. Simply, I came to see that there are always further opportunities to reappraise prior sense in light of new knowledge and changes to who we believe we are and what we think reality is (Weick, 1995). This will be a salient theme in later findings chapters, where we must question if sense-making is ever really complete.

While my experiences as an ayahuasca tourist led to a feeling of familiarity with these churches, I was well aware that I would be occupying an unusual social space, fluctuating between how much I would be viewed as an insider/outsider. For example, and reminiscing on being an ayahuasca tourist, it quickly became apparent that my ability to integrate and effectively manage this ethnography would hinge

on whether I consumed ayahuasca within these three churches. Re-examining my tourist diaries highlighted this aspect:

> January 2011 Ecuador: I watched two members of our group refuse to drink ayahuasca today, and they have been shunned. Nobody is speaking to them out of fear of supporting their stance. As far as I can tell, they had a rough time in the last ceremony. But now they are being accused of demonic activity. It seems that not drinking ayahuasca is a truly condemned act.

> March 2012 Ireland: It is my third ceremony here, and there is already trouble. A guy criticised ayahuasca and said he didn't want it. Someone spoke to him and asked if he was ok, and that did not go down well. There is a rumour that they have both rejected ayahuasca's salvation and are openly inviting evil into their lives. It is amazing how quickly morality and spiritual cleanliness is decided, and usually over consuming ayahuasca. The only thing I've seen that is supported is drinking less. But something has to be consumed to show commitment.

As expected, my decision for whether to drink this potent psychoactive brew was not achieved lightly. To help guide my decision-making, I meditated on my time as an ayahuasca tourist, while contemplating the requirements of being the researcher running this study. For example, my previous experiences in ayahuasca churches had showed me how drinking this brew can facilitate deeper levels of closeness with organisational members, through reducing personal barriers and catalysing a desire to share and explain cathartic moments and revelations. This appears to be a consequence not only stemming from the psychoactive properties of ayahuasca that induce greater levels of social openness, but from having shared traumatic experiences together as a group during ceremonies (Frecksa, Bokor & Winkelman, 2016).

For all of the perceived benefits of drinking ayahuasca, it must be noted that there are several clear detriments. The most noticeable of these, is the introduction of

visionary and hallucinatory non-sense, creating the potential for existential crises and cosmology episodes. While I was keen to avoid personal chaos, it must be noted that I have a weak constitution for ayahuasca, suffering with ongoing purging, and often taking days to fully recuperate. From a health perspective, this issue was compounded, as ayahuasca consumption necessitates fasting, and prohibition of several foods and beverages, before and after ceremonies, leading to physical and mental lethargy, particularly where ceremonies take place at night (Shanon, 2010). Thus, and while I felt that drinking ayahuasca can lead to truly extraordinary experiences, it was not something I wished to repeat while writing a thesis, analysing data or publishing papers. Having said this, I was mindful of the need for much sensitivity in negotiating this issue with the participant churches, as highlighted in my discussion with Caius (Church A):

> Author: The difficulty is how I can do my research and keep a clear head while drinking ayahuasca with you and the other churches. [Pause]. From past experiences, I wouldn't be able to travel on the same day and would be out of action for a day or so afterwards. [Pause]. I'm concerned though that not drinking with you might reduce our ability to interact, potentially even creating barriers between us. Does this make sense?
>
> Caius: Yeah I completely get you. To be honest with y'mate, I thought you would drink with us, and really join our family over the next year. I mean, yeah… y'don't have to. Mmm, I really don't think anyone will hold it against you. Our aya[huasca] will certainly blow your head off and you won't be coming down to Earth for ages. Maybe you shouldn't drink it. How long is your thesis again?
>
> Author: Between 80,000 to 100,000 words.
>
> Caius: [Laughing]. In that case, no aya[huasca] for you. Seriously, you'd struggle writing and doing this with us. Never mind with two other churches [laughs]. I see what y'mean though. Look, let me clear this up though. N'body is 'gonna blame you man. [Pause]. It really makes sense when y'describe your reasons. [Laughs]. You are missing out though man, really missing out. We'll be away with the fairies, exploring all the fantastic worlds. And you'll be writing

> notes or something. [Laughs]. Completely up t'you man, completely up to you. [Pause]. As long as you are clean. [Pause]. Damn it though man, it is a shame, but yeah, y'have a thesis to write and other guys to work with. I see y'r point I do. [Laughs]. We'll just have to make sure we help you see through our eyes. At least you know what we are talking about. At least you've done this before. [Pause]. Mmm, yeah, we can still do this together. You are still welcome.

We thus see that for all my concerns, that choosing not to drink ayahuasca did not hinder the warm welcome offered by these participants. This being said, I was aware that I would need to embed myself at a sufficient level within these three churches to glean how participant sense-making worked, or did not, as the case might be. As such, I often tried to engage in daily church life, carrying out mundane activities and chores such as cleaning, chatting, singing and praying, all of which created ongoing opportunities to observe and discuss ayahuasca non-sense and sense-making. Critically, and while I had spent many months in ayahuasca churches as a tourist, I had never been a key organisational decision-maker or had any particular say about doctrinal elements or church procedures. Throughout my acclimatisation within these three churches, the participants were keen to guide my understanding about what was going on and why, filling in my lack of understanding. Importantly, I was allowed to use a digital voice recorder throughout the ethnographic stage, and frequently took field notes, with the participants providing ongoing thoughts about their sense-making. Although all churches were very open to this study, there were only a few occasions that I was asked not to record a conversation.

While I have briefly discussed engaging in the participant ayahuasca churches, and my experiences with ayahuasca tourism, it is also worth noting that I am a cultural and quasi-practicing Christian, having received Christian instruction as a child and adult. Broadly speaking, engaging with ayahuasca is generally condemned within orthodox Christianity, as this brew tends to be linked to the Edenic apple, and thus considered a diabolic art. Having said this, and being a Christian theologian and ancient Greek philosopher, I take a more open and exploratory stance with the noetic realms and consider the search for truth to be at the heart of the human

endeavour. Thus, and while this study was unpopular amongst fellow church congregation members, it was no more so than my research on the Devil, Animal Heaven, or the ontological status of spirit beings. As such, I felt little inner turbulence from personal matters of faith in carrying out this study.

Finally, and no doubt a more mundane issue, my entrance into these churches highlighted the difficulties of engaging with multiple organisations, raising issues of tiredness from frequent travelling, and a general lack of time. These issues were heightened by churches also carrying out night ceremonies, meaning that I could be awake for over 24 hours at a time, including several hours before and after each ceremony. While I had expected difficulties with tiredness, I had not expected it to be this acute, which was concerning as it had the potential to impair my ability to better understand sense-making within these churches. However, and while this issue was never fully resolved, I became more accustomed to varying my sleeping patterns, and trying to schedule time spent between churches more efficaciously. Throughout this period, I remained mindful that sense- and self-making could occur at any time. Practically, therefore, I tried not to over emphasise ceremonies as the only source of sense-making information, also making sure to spend adequate time in pre- and post-ceremonial activities, and alongside daily tasks to more fully draw out participant sense-making processes. As might be imagined, close contact with these churches provided ongoing opportunities to better understand their nature, with this aspect being discussed in the following section.

4.1.2. The Ayahuasca Churches

Geographically, all three ayahuasca organisations were located in suburban areas in the North of England, within 100 miles of each other, thus reducing the burden of excessive travel time and costs. Due to confidentiality, and at the request of all participants, the organisational names have been omitted from this study, and were anonymised as church A, B and C. The term church was used as the participants preferred this term and commonly used it to depict their overtly religious ayahuasca organisations. Broadly speaking, this term seemed to capture the physicality of the ayahuasca venues, and activities of these groups. For example, all three churches

were orientated to collectively worshipping ayahuasca, mediated through religious belief and practice. Furthermore, and as will become apparent, each church was viewed as a portal to the otherworldly, achieved through imbibing this supernatural brew as Anita (Church B) said:

> In a way calling what we have a church is a bit of an odd one, although, mmm, it made sense to us. So many people in life don't like the word church. Umm, lots of links to Christianity I suppose. Mmm, then again, what else should we call it? We could hardly call it a clubhouse or anything else really. We needed to signify that it is somewhere sacred to us. [Pause]. I think we all understood the difficulty of labelling our building. We didn't want it to sound like it was just bricks and mortar, and we needed something that showed proper respect. [Pause]. After all, we are stepping into the spirit realms, and inviting spirits here with us. It is a true meeting place of different worlds, where the spirits walk among us. [Pause]. All-in-all, church was the best name we could come up with, and it sort of met our requirements. [Pause]. It isn't like other churches though. We aren't like them. I need to be very clear on this, so there is no confusion. Many churches exist in the UK and beyond. Problem is they mislead people away from the truth. Here, we are different, as we are the one true religion.

While these three samples showed some consternation over the term church, all accepted it as the most appropriate label. Yet, and at the same time, it was clear that the participants were active in demarcating their churches as the source of the 'one true religion', which tends to be a common claim found within a variety of religious systems (Wainwright, 2005). As we will see throughout this study, such claims were the foundation of these churches presenting their epistemological approaches to knowledge, truth and salvation as infallible.

Turning our attention to the physicality of these churches, all three were located in privately owned buildings, situated within spacious gardens, where privacy was maintained through large hedges, trees, and members observing secrecy about their

activities. These single storied venues ranged between 700 to 900 square feet in size and due to the intense psychoactive effects of ayahuasca, were in quiet locations, away from the public and passing traffic, thus reducing the impact of external stimuli on the visionary state. From my experiences as a tourist, such locations are critical for the wellbeing of those consuming ayahuasca, allowing individuals a greater feeling of safety, while their bodies are lethargic, and their minds are enmeshed within sound and light sensitive visions and hallucinations. Commenting on this, Stanley (Church B) said:

> Choosing where to have our church was a tricky thing. We are only a small following here, and this really limited our choice. We'd thought about renting somewhere, but that was a dumb idea, as how would we explain what we were doing if anyone saw us. Plus, we'd have to purify it from outsiders. Too much money, hard work and risk. We had thought about having it in someone's house, and we even tried this. Problem was, we'd always end up with the postman knocking on the door or something like that. We really needed something more suitable, as it really screwed with our heads if we were under the influence [of ayahuasca] and someone interrupted us. [Pause]. In the end, the only sensible solution was to find a safer place, and fortunately one of our members had somewhere perfect. [Pause]. His garden. So, we put up a wooden building, and it has worked well. Hidden from the world, we are left to our own devices. So now we can drink ayahuasca undisturbed, away from prying eyes and never have to worry about the outside world breaking in.

With the participants considering their churches to be sacred spaces, it was not possible to take photographs. It also seemed that the participants were concerned about the collection of visual 'evidence' within this ethnography, that could be used to indicate potential wrongdoing, which again highlighted their concerns over being stigmatised as drug users (Siff, 2015). Importantly, such concerns were often spiritual in nature, with many participants arguing that malevolent forces opposed to the good work of ayahuasca, would lead to their church's downfall. Having said this, and with anonymity in place, the participants encouraged my writing about

their churches, particularly with regards to function and appearance, as detailed by Sally (Church C):

> I'd love you to be able to take pictures while you are, especially of us, as it'd be a great reminder of us when you leave. Mmm, we can't do that though, as the world being the way the world is, people would use anything to shut down our sacred ministry here. There are dark forces at work and as you have no protection from ayahuasca, we'd be in danger from the monsters who'd target us. [Pause]. Dark spirits want to attack ayahuasca, and even inadvertently, we can't let your research harm her or us. [Pause]. Writing about us is different though, as words are not evidence of anything we do, and that could be anyone.

Thus, it was apparent that all three churches had a ceremonial room, shared communal space, bathroom, and kitchen. Practically, the need for a bathroom was driven by the potential for purging, and a kitchen for preparing food and ayahuasca. On a more mundane level, and with ceremonies often lasting for several hours, these rooms also allowed a greater level of comfort without overly hindering group activities. It must be noted though, that while I was given a high degree of access throughout these churches, that I was not allowed to prepare ayahuasca, and was prohibited from entering the kitchens during these periods. Explaining this, Nick (Church C) argued:

> Don't get us wrong. We like you being here, and you are becoming like a family member. Like a distant cousin [laughs]. But we both know that you aren't drinking ayahuasca. And this means you can't prepare her. This is a sacrament to us, and only those involved in divine union with her can prepare her. [Pause]. No watching how we do this either. Y'see, we can cleanse you all day long with our prayers and things. Mmm, but only ayahuasca really gets rid of all the dirtier aspects within your soul. Unless you drink her, you'll never really be clean.

We thus come to see the sacred nature of this brew, and how the participants personified and deified this psychoactive. Just as importantly though, how the holiest activity, i.e., preparing ayahuasca was limited to those perceived to be 'in divine union with her'. Furthermore, and through the lenses of these three churches, that only drinking ayahuasca is truly capable of cleansing the soul. Importantly, we might wonder if I always had a taint due to not being free from malevolent forces. These things being said, preparing ayahuasca was the only part of church life that I was prohibited from and where the participants were unwilling to provide any further information. This being the case, I made no further attempts to elucidate this area, due to concerns about antagonising the participants, and creating social distance which might have hindered further relevant data collection. It is also worth mentioning that the participants never mentioned preparing ayahuasca in my presence, often leaving the room to discuss this act, or to carry it out.

Turning our attention back to the physicality of these venues, it was clear that they dual functioned as ceremonial centres as well as more mundane meeting places for day-to-day church activities. Comfort seemed paramount in these churches, with yoga mats, sofas, bean bags, and blankets being spread throughout these venues, to reduce the tempestuous nature of the ayahuasca ceremonies. Functionally, buckets, towels, and sanitary products were readily available to help clean up after individuals had purged. Mirroring my experiences in South America, these three ayahuasca churches were simply decorated, including a host of religious and spiritual imagery from Christianity, Buddhism, and the New Age, as mentioned by Felix (Church A):

> We came from a lot of different beliefs here. Although most of us feel some affinity to Christianity. Look around and you'll see lots of different religious pictures and statues. We felt it was important to allow everyone to have a say and represent what they loved and respected. Over time, ayahuasca has been helping us work out the truth of religion and so some images and statues have been removed, and I'm sure more will be. Our religion is alive and forever changing as we get to the truth of life, ourselves and ayahuasca. This is our religion for us, and although we don't all share exactly the same

belief, we allow people to use what helps them grow and experience ayahuasca more fully. As long as it follows what ayahuasca teaches.

While this apparent openness to religious pluralism might suggest a rich collection of mental and cultural sense-making resources within these churches, we also see the regulatory nature of these organisation through the comment: 'As long as it follows what ayahuasca teaches'. This issue of sharing and regulating sense will be returned to multiple times in later findings chapters, due to the importance of this aspect. Moving back to discussing the buildings, I must point out that while I was not necessarily surprised at the variety of religious objects and images, I had not expected to see contradictory images next to each other, such as Christ and Satan, as highlighted in my conversation with Brandi (Church C):

Author: I hope you don't mind me asking, but I noticed that you have several religious pictures on your walls [Pause]. I haven't seen these images put together before. Mmm, this is Christ? And this is Satan next to him?

Brandi: New guys always get a bit confused when they see these pictures Hah! Not surprising really. [Laughs]. But we are telling our own tale here, about our experience of the world, guided by the goddess Ayahuasca. In a way, our church is all about bringing truth to the world. The real truth, unlike those other hokey religions. You won't find fakery here. We are all about truth, and we bring the final truth. So, on the one hand, we have Christ, who is our role model of how to behave. I'm not sure we accept him as the son of God, or as God. Umm, and then we have Satan, who tells us to live a life committed to knowledge. He did bring knowledge in Eden after all. Personally, I think he brought Adam and Eve ayahuasca, and that the Bible didn't tell the truth about what happened next.

Author: Ah I see, yes, I think I understand. [Pause]. And how were these truths uncovered?

Brandi: Pretty simple really. We spent a lot of time drinking ayahuasca and reading old religious stories. Oftentimes we tried to work out what was favourable to what we were doing. Honestly, if

> we liked it, we must be being guided by ayahuasca. We aren't picking what we want just because we want it. Ayahuasca must be guiding how we decide.

Looking at such statements, we start to see how cultural contradictions are negotiated as part of religious practices and beliefs within church life. Critically, and as we might imagine, being validated by the goddess Ayahuasca, is certainly advantageous for those wishing to speak with authority, but raising the question, how this is achieved. When we consider that these churches were relatively new, being no more than nine years old, it seems likely that they were still in their formative stages, discerning what sense to make, and continually reshaping their sense-making models of the world and themselves. Drawing this section to a close, my attention now turns to the motivational aspects of how and why these ayahuasca churches formed.

4.1.3. Motivations for Forming Ayahuasca Churches

When we consider the relatively unique nature of these ayahuasca churches in comparison to more commonly accepted UK-based religions, we might wonder what had motivated these three sets of participants to set up these psychoactive churches. Critically, and prior to this study, little was known about this issue, as the extant literature had typically focused on individuals pursuing ayahuasca tourism in a different country, rather than making their own churches. As such, this section examines participant motivations to have established these churches, and the practical elements of forming these congregations. Helping us understand these aspects, Gary (Church C) argued:

> I'd been to South America loads of times to drink ayahuasca, but it cost a fortune. Travelling there and back is hard work. Just far too tiring. [Pause]. Mmm, so y'know I thought about it a lot. And it made sense to do all this here. And why not? The UK has a great tradition of spirituality. Why should everyone have to spend thousands of pounds per year and pay some fat cat shaman who takes

> over your life and only teaches his version of spirituality. Or some dude claiming to be a shaman. So much of what you buy over there is fake, and just not worth it. Fake ayahuasca and fake shamans. I've heard some real horror stories about inauthentic shamans mixing all sorts of dirty drugs in ayahuasca. Speaking to other tourists I even wondered if they had ever tasted ayahuasca. This worried me. How safe was I? Not everyone is honest. Lot of snake oil salesmen about. Ayahuasca tourism is big business now, and the temptation to give tourists visions is immense. In the end I wanted to do it where I could control what I was drinking. Think about it. I left Christianity and my former priest behind. I wasn't looking for more of the same. I didn't want some new priest telling me what to do. I may as well have stayed going to my old church if I'd wanted that.

Such comments were common amongst the participants, highlighting a myriad of mundane and supernatural concerns about the over commercialisation of ayahuasca tourism. For example, it was clear that there had been a material dissatisfaction with the high cost of ayahuasca tourism, and length of time required to travel to South America. Furthermore, there was little to suggest that shamans (authentic or plastic) were particularly trusted, often being positioned as more concerned with selling religious beliefs and visionary experiences, than facilitating a polyphonic culture of spiritual growth. It is of course worth ruminating on the extent to which these participants had met authentic and plastic shamans or conflated who they were. This was certainly a concern from my tourism, with profoundly different experiences seemingly based on the authenticity of the shaman, which can be difficult for a novice tourist to discern. Like the participants though, I had noticed that tourists seeking otherworldly experiences often feared the potential for ayahuasca to be contaminated with other illicit products. Not surprisingly, this issue was further complicated by ayahuasca leaving individuals physically vulnerable during ceremonies and in a highly suggestive state to a shaman giving sense, as Gary (Church C) said:

> When you've done aya[huasca] a few times you come to realise how at risk you really are. You know what I'm saying. After coming back

> from Brazil, it hit me that I'd just believed everything my shaman had said. I was stupefied by his words. And I just accepted it all. I know aya[huasca] makes us more pliable and all that. But these guys, are savvy at what they do. They know magic and can bend us anyway they want. I saw it man. I really saw it. I experienced it. And I came home not wanting anyone to have that power over me again. Mmm, I do respect these guys though, and I 'wanna do what they do. [Pause]. I want their power. But for the life of me, meeting them again is not a risk I'm willing to take. Plus, I just couldn't afford it anymore, they bled me dry.

It seems therefore that forming these churches was a way for the participants to not only mitigate their perceived risks from tourism, but to work towards a new sense of self through using these churches to empower themselves as 'shamans' within the ayahuasca experience. Figure 4 shows the most salient motivations for forming these churches from participants who had previously experienced ayahuasca:

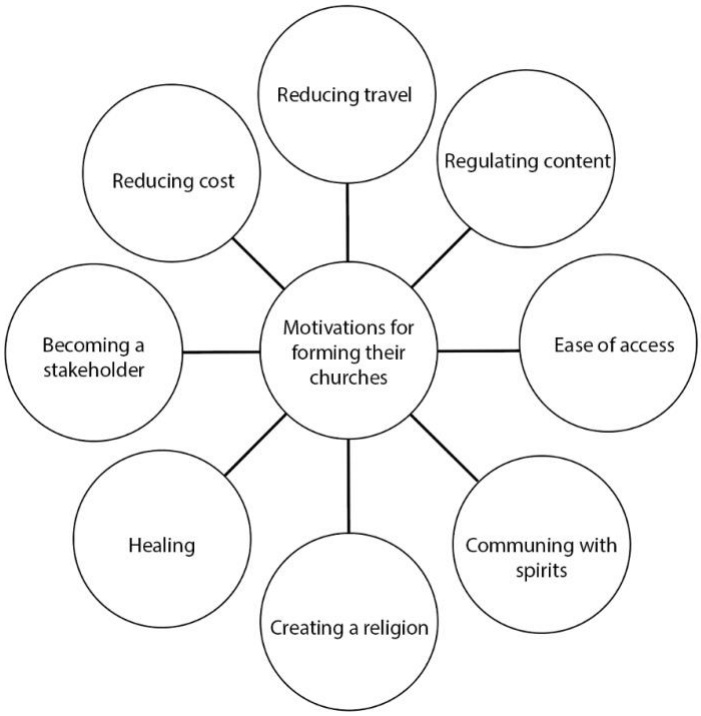

Figure 4. Motivations for forming ayahuasca churches.

Overviewing these motivations, we see many similarities to ayahuasca tourists (Winkelman, 2001), but with the additions of removing the need to travel, associated costs, and increasing their agency in the ayahuasca process.

Thus, and having come to a better understanding of participant motivations for forming these churches, it is worth questioning how these organisations were actually formed. This is a critical issue when we consider that ayahuasca consumption in the UK is relatively rare, and not often advertised. Discussing this aspect, the participants frequently stated that they had met each other through prior psychoactive or spiritual events, which led them to discuss the possibility of forming a church where they could learn directly from ayahuasca, as Steph (Church B) said:

> I met some others at a small event in Ecuador where several of us were taking ayahuasca. We were sick of listening to views that we couldn't challenge. According to the shaman, we either agreed with him or left. [Pause]. This didn't sit well with us at all. Listening to everyone else there, it was a common problem. [Pause]. We had a choice. Give in and continue doing a way we didn't like. Try to find more flexible shamans and spend loads of money doing so. Quit. Or do it ourselves. Amazingly, we made the right decision to make our church. For us. This let us have our own values and beliefs. [Pause]. Let me tell you, I'd had some pretty bad experiences travelling abroad and there are some right dodgy fellows offering ayahuasca. You 'wanna be safe when drinking ayahuasca. So over time, I exchanged contact details with other such travellers and those of us who lived close came up with the idea of forming this church. There was some concern about the beginning, y'know mainly due to our uncertainty of getting the plants, how to grow them, prepare the brew, and the legality of all of this y'know? The more we read though the more we found it was safe. It sure was a learning experience. And a good one too. Doing it ourselves was a way to achieve what we wanted. Otherwise, you are trapped within someone else's story. It took some time though, as none of us had

> any experience of doing this sort of thing. [Pause]. And y'know, over time, I met some guys who'd never done aya[huasca] but looked like the right stuff. Proper into spirits and all that so I invited 'em here.

As a tourist, I had heard of people forming their own churches, not only to consume ayahuasca but to increase their otherworldly experiences through a variety of other psychoactives, and usually for the reasons detailed in this section. Broadly speaking, it often seemed that the ayahuasca experience left tourists wanting to continue their consumption as well as sense- and self-making, but more on their own terms, alongside others of a like mind. Perhaps then, we should not be surprised that these churches formed, and as part of this process, came to invite new members who had never been ayahuasca tourists. As we might expect though, inviting 'virgin' members was not without controversy as explained in a conversation between Deborah and Caius (both Church A):

> Caius: It was a difficult decision to invite people in who'd not done ayahuasca before. It was necessary though. With best intentions, we didn't have enough people who'd been to an ayahuasca ceremony, so we started sounding people out that we knew well. Anyone who might be the right stuff and help share the costs and burdens of setting up this church. It wasn't easy let me tell you.
> Deborah: I'm really pleased you invited me though as I'd always wanted to get in touch with proper magic and a real religion. I was nervous as you know.
> Caius: Yeah, I remember [laughs]. So why did you join us?
> Deborah: It was too crazy to miss really. At worst you were some nutjobs doing drugs, but what if it was true. [Pause]. You said that we'd get to see the world properly. In the end that is [laughs]. And I'd really see spirits and speak to my dead relatives. You even said that I'd get to do magic and travel to heaven and hell. And I did. It opened up a whole new world of possibilities. As I just said. How could I refuse this? [Pause]. I was a bit sceptical about getting perfect health and never being sick again. But hey ho, what could I lose?

> Apart from my reputation, and you promised you'd never tell anyone.
>
> Caius: Well that worked both ways as we really had to trust you too.

We thus see that the motivations for those who had never consumed ayahuasca were similar to more experienced ayahuasca tourists, seeking health (Winkelman, 2001), magic, to see reality as it really is (McKenna, Luna & Towers, 1995), and validation of the supernatural. Critically though, there was a clear element of risk on the part of all church members, with trust being required to prevent these ayahuasca activities being disseminated amongst the wider community. It seemed though that once an individual had consumed ayahuasca that any attempt to discuss this outside of these churches ran the risk of self-stigmatisation, as well as negatively labelling core congregation members. Drawing this section to a close, the next section helps us understand how these participants attempted to form religions as a key part of their sense- and self-making.

4.1.4. Forming a New Religion

Within this section we will explore how these samples worked to form religious systems based on consuming ayahuasca. As a starting point, it is worth noting that there is an increasing desire in Europe and North America for more personalised and fluid approaches to religion, with individuals frequently seeking to renegotiate extant doctrines, beliefs and practices (Partridge 2005). Helping us understand the desire for forming an ayahuasca-based religion, Sylvia (Church A) argued:

> I'd grown weary of organised religion and being told what to think. Not getting explanations of how something worked or why it happened was so annoying. It was like being a child. How could I grow under that? I couldn't. [Pause]. I needed a way to embrace the divine. Y'know, you go to church normally, and some priest stands there. It's all sterile. God isn't there. There are no angels and no religious experiences. I needed something for me. A new way of speaking with spirits. And oh yes, I really wanted to speak to spirits.

> But not on some priest's terms. On my own, and making a new religion seemed the perfect way to go about this. You might ask why we even wanted a religion. Mmm, thinking about this, it seemed the right thing to do. To make it all official. At least to define what ayahuasca is, how it works, and to make brighter futures. Ayahuasca is so different to anything else out there, we couldn't just follow another faith's approach. Although we certainly borrowed from other religions. We needed something truly for us, where ayahuasca could reveal herself and all the wonders of the universe.

We thus see the desire for a new religion as a means to draw out fundamental aspects related to the nature of being, while gaining a deeper understanding of the mundane and miraculous. Listening to the participants, it was clear that these new religions would allow them to function as innovative stakeholders in the drive to make sense of themselves through the lens of ayahuasca. Although and as we will now see, a core concern was the freedom to practice faith, as Sue (Church B) commented:

> In a way trying to make a new religion was the best thing I'd ever done. I remember thinking it would give me complete freedom, and that I'd have a religion for me. Just for me. Then it hit me that I didn't really understand a lot of what I was seeing in ayahuasca. While I'd have people here to help me, I realised that we would decide together, as this would have to be a religion for all of us. Now, this concerned me, as I know we all need to be represented, but I wouldn't get complete freedom like I'd wanted. Ah, but then if we all got what we wanted, we'd all have to form our own separate churches [laughs]. More seriously though, there have been a lot of disagreements over what to make our religion. I mean everything has been a point of argument. Who should run the ceremony? What is ayahuasca really? When can we take a toilet break in a ceremony? And should we be private or spread the good word?

While all churches had been in operation for at least six years at the start of this ethnography, it was clear that there were still acute tensions about a variety of metaphysical and practical aspects of church life. At the heart of this, was when something should happen, why it should happen, who decides, and what this means in relation to a workable systematised religion, where one metaphysical perspective could undermine several others. As we might imagine, these issues rarely went away, and even when negotiated solutions were found, sense-making was likely to continue, as even concrete beliefs were adjusted over time. Having said this, each church had a codified set of beliefs, put together in the form of mission statements to help guide their congregational sense-making, as detailed in Table 13:

Organisation	Mission statement	Ethnometaphysical explanation
A	'We are here to bring truth and Heaven to all through the Goddess Ayahuasca. Using her guiding light, all will be cleansed and liberated from mortal suffering'. Printed on posters and prominently maintained throughout the church on walls.	Looking at this statement we see Ayahuasca presented as a personified deity in the form of the goddess, metaphysically cleansing her congregation to usher in an attainable Heaven for those who follow her divine will. We also see ayahuasca functioning as an epistemological agent granting access to truth, as well as a spiritual panacea alleviating suffering.
B	'Ayahuasca is divine and fosters love, friendship and gnosis [self-knowledge] through a mutually loving family. Only through communing with Ayahuasca can our eyes and hearts be opened to the truth of the universe, and that we are eternal'. Kept within church hymn books.	Here we see Ayahuasca positioned as a deity and acting as an epistemological conduit to bestow truth on her followers. Importantly, truth is through sensory perception, and the claim that what is viewed in the ayahuasca state is a verbatim account of reality. Finally, humans are positioned as eternal beings.
C	'Through devotion to Ayahuasca, we remove the sin of the world and embrace salvation. It is our duty to free ourselves and creation from slavery to the world'. Generally, verbally uttered, but also heavily used at the bottom of e-mail communications within the church.	Like in the other churches, Ayahuasca is depicted as an active divine agent, directly capable of removing sin, and reorientating the faithful into salvation. Having said this, we see a critical theme emerging that the material is a form of bondage, with ayahuasca seemingly offering a means to escape this imprisonment, allowing the faithful to embrace eternal life. Broadly speaking, such notions are commonly found within a variety of religions such as Christianity, where the body is often viewed as a corrupting force on the purity of the soul.

Table 13. Organisational mission statements.

Examining Table 13, we see several religious themes, including undertaking ayahuasca ceremonies as a means to (1) spread the good word of the goddess Ayahuasca, (2) access truth, (3) achieve salvation, (4) commune with a deity, and (5) gain access to the afterlife. While these themes were underpinned by numerous metaphysical concepts, it seems fair to say that they were often a reworking of core Christian themes, as Benny (Church A) said: 'well, yeah, we do use Christianity a lot to understand what we do. It's what we know best. But we strip out the rubbish and only present the truth'. This notion of Christianity being a cognitive and linguistic scaffold to make sense of ayahuasca is something that will be considered multiple times in the following chapters. However, and returning to the mission statements, we should note that even though all churches supported an evangelical approach to communicating their newly found faith, there was little to suggest that any participant actively spread these religions during the ethnography, as Peter (Church C) argued:

> There is always disagreement about whether we should help the world or not. It isn't easy man; it really isn't easy. Our mission statement isn't supposed to be a massive essay, more a rough way to live. Mmm, like a perspective on what we do here. In a way, everything has to be worked out. Umm, look at it like this, even the Ten Commandments are only a guide, and starting point. So, yeah, the statement represents our core beliefs but can never be more than the beginning of what to do. [Pause]. I see you noticed that our written stuff is different to what we say and do at times. Umm, ok, yes, well, it is certainly the case that we want to tell the world about ayahuasca. It is a difficult issue though as we don't 'wanna be labelled as drug users. [Pause]. We have argued about this lots over the past couple of years. We used to feel like cowards for not inviting the wider public. At least in the beginning, as lots of our conversations were initially about expansion. Ayahuasca is legal y'know? But the stigma is a problem. And we don't want actual druggies coming here looking to get high. Honestly, so few people want spirituality in the UK. All they want are crazy visions. Could you imagine what would happen if the papers saw what we do. Oh,

> my goodness, it would be the end of all of us. We'd be labelled as devil worshippers, drug addicts, and a danger to all decent folk. [Pause]. So, yeah, maybe we are cowards afraid to be destroyed by public opinion. But mmm, it came to us. Perhaps we just don't have the right knowledge yet. Maybe, as we come to understand ayahuasca more, we will learn how to speak about what we are doing. [Pause]. We are waiting for ayahuasca to teach us how to do better. In the end we will preach, but not today, just not today. Not until ayahuasca gives us a method for how to do this safely.

We thus see a conflict between these broadly evangelical mission statements requiring the participants to 'save' the world, and their desire to protect how they are perceived in their communities. Critically though, it appears that the temporary solution for this schism was to have faith in ayahuasca being able to reveal a solution, at some point in the future. Irrespective of whether this would happen, the participants often seemed relieved to have backgrounded this sense and decision-making challenge, pushing aside any responsibility to make sense in the present, and relying on what information could be gleamed from the ayahuasca state. While it was difficult to discern the extent that this was a tactical 'excuse' to avoid the challenge of promoting their faith, or an overt act of fideism, this approach satisfied an acute sense-making problem, allowing the participants to move forward in their daily lives and religions.

4.1.5. Ayahuasca Ceremonies

Even though there is still much debate between materialist and spiritual ontologies about how ayahuasca works on the body (Siegel & West, 1975; Weil & Rosen, 1993), there is growing recognition that the environment and mindset of the individual consuming this brew influences the nature of the hallucinatory and visionary experience (Talin & Sanabria, 2017). Unfortunately, there is still a poverty of understanding in this area and how ayahuasca ceremonies impact the emergence of non-sense, and consequently how it is processed into sense. This section therefore explores the ayahuasca ceremonies, detailing the mundane and

supernatural, while drawing out the role of the participants as ceremonial leaders and congregation members. As a starting point, Table 14 shows a systematised account of all the main ceremonial stages from all the three churches. Importantly, this demarcation did not attempt to capture minor nuances between ceremonies, but rather, highlight the most pertinent aspects common within all churches. Practically, therefore, the collection of data was through watching ceremonies, but also taking feedback from the participants to check that they concurred with my demarcations.

Ceremony Stage	Aim and rationale	Observations
1. Pre-ceremonial debriefing	To discuss the aims of the following ayahuasca ceremony, and to provide a space for members to raise concerns or to address aspects they feel are important. This was a time to set an agenda and raise potential concerns.	Even though all participants were relatively experienced in undertaking ayahuasca ceremonies, it was clear that there were often tensions during this initial stage. This was particularly the case where individuals were seeking to explore a specific aspect of themselves that they regarded as troublesome, and for example, linked to painful memories.
2. Ceremony opens	To delineate normal everyday life from the sacred time and space to be engaged with throughout the ceremony. Reaffirmation of the agenda was common alongside reminders of the rules to be obeyed.	During this stage, it was apparent that all participants were keen to divest themselves of their more mundane concerns, with overt attempts to calm nerves and to anticipate positive sense- and self-making. Where acute issues were to be explored during ceremonies, these aspects were frequently raised to create a greater awareness amongst the groups.
3. Meditation and spiritual cleansing	To spiritually cleanse the participants and prepare their minds and bodies to engage with ayahuasca. In practicality, a variety of techniques were used including burning sage, wearing white outfits and prohibiting negative language, thoughts and imagery.	This was often one of the strictest stages, approached with seriousness and a commitment to remove negative aspects perceived as potentially harmful the individual and wider group. Speech was generally limited during this time, with participants limiting physical movements in order to focus on meditation, prayer and preparation to engage directly with ayahuasca.

4. Drinking ayahuasca	To induce the effects of ayahuasca. Typically, ayahuasca was consumed within 30 minutes of the ceremony opening, and then again two or three hours later.	In all churches, drinking ayahuasca was a sacred event, with strict observation of rules, to mitigate any offence to this deity. Broadly speaking, showing reverence was a means to achieve a closer personal relationship with the spirit ayahuasca, with a lack of respect being an open invitation for acute non-sense via painful visions and hallucinations. As such, all participants tended to bow in front of this brew, praising ayahuasca's wisdom, and pleading for her to share her knowledge with them during the ceremony.
5. Singing, dancing and meditation	To invite the spirit of ayahuasca to engage with the participants, and to again prepare the body and mind for this union. Singing was common throughout the ceremonies but avoided when the influence of the brew was at its zenith.	This stage cycled between inducing religious fervour via dance and singing, and silent meditation and contemplation. While the shamanic ceremonial leader often guided the group with these acts, all participants seemed free to meditate should they start experiencing hallucinations or visions.
6. The ayahuasca state and purging	To engage directly with ayahuasca and experience perceptual shifts, with purging being a part of spiritual cleansing. Generally, communication was prohibited during these stages.	This was the longest of all stages, with at least two to four hours given for individuals to experience visions and hallucinations. Throughout this time, ceremonial leaders payed great attention to which stage their group members were in, reflecting on whether to offer more ayahuasca, while considering whether ceremonial aims had been met.

7. Meditation and singing	To prepare the mind and body to re-engage with normal and everyday life. These aspects were carried out before and after the peak of the ayahuasca experience.	As the influence of ayahuasca waned, the participants had greater volitional control over their bodies, and showed a greater level of consciousness with regard to their external surroundings. This being the case, meditation and singing were used to leave the ayahuasca state fully. Practically, this stage was a test for whether the participants were fit and able to undertake simple tasks without being a danger to themselves or others.
8. Post-ceremonial debriefing	To provide members with an opportunity to speak to each other about their experiences, and to aid in the sense making process. This was also an opportunity to consider whether new knowledge might overturn previous doctrinal sense.	Having regained a greater awareness of their surroundings and themselves, the debriefing session generally took place in the ceremonial venue, limiting movement, in case the effects of ayahuasca were still being felt. Being part of the ceremony however, speech was not free, as who could speak was often dictated by ceremonial leaders, and in-depth consideration given for how new insights from visions and hallucinations might help or hinder accepted views of these churches, their practices, and their emerging sense-making models of what it is to be human within the universe. Not surprisingly therefore, this sense-making process often lasted longer than one ceremony, with future ceremonies also being an opportunity to explore salient issues, and to seek guidance from ayahuasca about what sense to accept, if any.

9. Ceremony closes	To return to normal everyday life from the sacred time and space engaged with throughout the ayahuasca ceremony. Broadly speaking, this was a time of joy, and spiritual adulation, looking to discern new insights as the mundane world was re-engaged with.	Perhaps more than at any stage, the ceremonial closure revealed the biphasic stage of the ayahuasca experience, i.e., (1) ceremonial and otherworldly, and (2) the mundane post-ceremony. While earlier stages had prepared the participants to leave these ceremonies, there often appeared to be an awareness that leaving a ceremony was a return to something less magical and more physical. For those committed to magical beliefs, this seemed an emotional time, experienced as a sense of loss.
10. Eating and drinking	To discuss experiences less formally, and to re-engage with the material world. Eating and drinking was typically argued as a grounding experience to restart the embodied experience as the influence of ayahuasca was left behind.	After the ceremonies were complete, this stage removed any formality, inviting free conversations and general merriment, while eating and drinking. Having prepared food and drinks earlier, this allowed the participants more time to relax and reflect on their visions and hallucinations, often with other preferred group members. Broadly speaking, this period was one of celebration, even after difficult non-sensical ceremonies, with all individuals being encouraged to search for cathartic outcomes. While my interactions had generally been limited to that of observer during the earlier stages, I was free to interact with all group members during this period.

Table 14. Synthesised ayahuasca ceremony stages.

Examining Table 14, we see that each church had approximately 10 ceremonial stages, with the potential to add or remove stages, such as repeatedly drinking ayahuasca, if perceived necessary. Trying to understand the high level of similarity between ceremonies, it appears that many members of these different churches had been heavily influenced by their ayahuasca experiences in South America, alongside common cultural depictions on social media. Commenting on this, Bailey (Church B) said:

> I'd never taken a psychedelic before coming here [to her church], but I was immediately hooked. When I joined here, they had been doing ceremonies for a while but were still fine tuning them. And we continued this for a long time. [Pause]. Of course, there was a lot of discussion about how to run our ceremonies. [Pause]. Everyone knows that drinking ayahuasca is a sacred act, requiring the utmost respect and devotion. The question for all of us here was how to achieve this. We didn't want to upset ayahuasca, as we wanted her help and guidance. [Pause]. Fortunately, there is loads online about this, and tons of videos on YouTube. We were all able to watch lots of ceremonies from across South America, taking notes about what would work best for us. [Pause]. Plus, a few of our members had been to see shamans and they told us what to do. Thinking about it, and from the bits I know, most ceremonies are the same. Bit of difference between how you do this or that, but most of them follow a pattern. Mmm, yes, I think that is right, and we just followed them. I think the main difference is what we say about our ceremonies and what we want to achieve. But there are only so many ways of making a ceremony if you know what I mean?

Even though I did not drink ayahuasca, I was free to take part in all other ceremonial aspects, such as being purified, singing, dancing and meditating. Thus, and while the participants would spend up to seven hours negotiating their ayahuasca experiences, I was allowed to make written notes, but not use a Dictaphone to record what was said. Within itself, this meant that I had much time to observe and reflect on how these ceremonies unfolded, with it being clear that personal

introspection was encouraged during the ceremonies, and collective sense-making after the ceremonies finished. While the number of members varied between each church, it was clear that all participants were expected to attend ceremonies, with rotas typically being used to dictate when an individual would take on a 'shamanic' role to lead a ceremony. Procedurally, all church members were expected to drink ayahuasca, including the ceremonial leader, who guided the ritual, spoke when necessary, and assisted individuals who were struggling with challenging visions. Having said this, it was apparent that the ceremonial leaders often drank less ayahuasca than other members, thus maintaining a higher level of lucidity in the material world to orchestrate these events. Discussing being a ceremonial leader, William (Church A) stated:

> I have to drink ayahuasca when running a ceremony to commune with ayahuasca and hear what she has to say. Ah, but I need to be competent too. It is a difficult balancing of act of needing to be in touch with the spirits while being able to do my job as leader. Usually, I just take a sip to help me contact aya[huasca]. This isn't enough to knock my consciousness entirely out of this world and into the next. Depending on the ceremony, I can always take some more ayahuasca later if things are going well. Sometimes, and when everything is as planned, others will invite me to join them in drinking more. This works best when they are starting to come out of it. It all depends though on what we want to get from ayahuasca on that day.

Throughout the ceremonies, all participants changed into white clothing to demonstrate their purity, and to reject evil, which was something I'd frequently observed as an ayahuasca tourist. Furthermore, and depending on the weather conditions, the participants also used sunlight/moonlight as a form of metaphysical cleansing, which is a theme found within Christianity (Aquinas, 1997). This was often alongside using a variety of religions hymns, songs, mantras and icaros to guide their journeys into visionary and hallucinatory Heaven or Hell. Broadly speaking, it seemed that the organisations were quite open to what songs could be

sung, including popular cultural music from a variety of countries, as Benny (Church A) said:

> Our choice of songs and music is incredibly important, and we can't just sing or play anything, and we wouldn't want to. We might play instruments, sing, and listen to pre-recorded spiritual, orchestral, pop, and religious music. It depends on what we need. We are more likely to sing and play instruments at the beginning when we are lucid and use an iPod when we are deep in the throes of ayahuasca and our bodies no longer work. What drives our music choice is what we seek from our communion with ayahuasca. If we want to spend time in Heaven, then beautiful uplifting stuff, or Hell, then something with a heavy beat, or sad music. Everything has its time and place musically speaking. We innervate the body with music for the magic to happen. You might wonder why we go to Hell. Well, it can help to be swamped with chaos, as it forces us to dig deep within and seek what really pains us. Also, Ayahuasca is more likely to pity us and help us if we suffer.

Taking part during the day and night, it was common to watch the participants, crying, purging, morally self-flagellating, and recounting otherworldly experiences, alongside claiming to speak with spirits (Shanon, 2010). Towards the end of the ceremonies and as the effects of ayahuasca waned, meditation and singing would resume, focusing on the positive aspects of the experiences, with group members frequently discussing their experiences, if they so wished. Finally, after this debrief, the ceremonies were closed by the leader, and all members went to have pre-prepared food and drinks. This was considered a vital part of the ayahuasca experience, where members could talk more informally with preferred individuals as they tried to make sense and understand their experiences. Importantly, the participants were often most keen to speak during eating and drinking as their memories were still fresh, and they claimed to be able to recount them in great detail.

4.2. Summary

Throughout this chapter, several fundamental aspects of this ethnography have been considered in relation to how the participants formed their churches, and their motivations for doing so. As might have been expected with a psychoactive study, making sense of the nature of these churches was a complex act, and in my case, further complicated by having been an ayahuasca tourist, thus having to renegotiate personal memories related to previous hallucinations and visions. Irrespective of these challenges, entering church life was taken as an opportunity to understand a hitherto unexplored phenomena in the ethnobiology literature, i.e., the formation of ayahuasca churches in the UK, and their consequent potential for sense-making. In addressing this issue, we came to see that these churches were all relatively young and were covertly formed due to wider fears from being stigmatised as criminal elements within their communities. Practically, this aspect was highly apparent, with the participants frequently showing concerns about being exposed, and being willing to breach their self-mandates to proselytise the 'good word 'of ayahuasca. Having said this, it was clear that these churches were driven by strong motivations similar to tourists seeking healing, real magic, authentic contacts with spirit beings, and to see reality as it really is. Critically though, and by forming these churches, these participants had explicitly rejected the teachings and doctrines of genuine shamans, instead desiring the right to create their own belief and sense-making systems, by empowering themselves as shamans. However, and even though there was much to say that the participants sought to have bespoke ayahuasca religions fit-for-purpose for themselves, it was clear that they frequently drew off past tourist experiences and social media to determine how to run their ceremonies. In this way, it seems fair to say that the desire for newness and innovation was rarely met in the construction of these churches, as much of their religious belief and practice was built from extant linguistic and schematic resources already held in these groups. Within itself, this might go some way to account for the high level of similarity between these churches for their use of terminology and devotional practices.

With this chapter having shown the mundane and otherworldly nature of these churches, the following chapter explores the emergence of ayahuasca non-sense within visions and hallucinations.

Chapter 5. Ayahuasca Non-Sense

5.1. Introduction

This chapter introduces and interrogates the concept of non-sense, not only as a general phenomenon experienced in daily life, but in relation to ayahuasca visions and hallucinations. As such, consideration is made of how the participants understood the non-sensical aspects of everyday life prior to drinking ayahuasca, and how, if at all, these experiences influenced the processing of psychoactive non-sense. Explicitly, therefore, I examine how being human necessitates cognitive and social strategies to cope with 'living in a world of non-sense'. Building on this foundation, my attention turns to how these participants constructed and negotiated 'ayahuasca non-sense', segmented further into 'hallucinatory non-sense' and 'visual non-sense'. In so doing, we will see how different forms of non-sense are often highly subjective but create a shared experience of psychological distress. Importantly though, and while some non-sense is easily processed into sense, should sense-making fail, individuals can be overwhelmed by non-sense in the form of 'cosmology episodes' leading to existential terrors stalking the mind, and life and self, become an unknowable phenomenon. As a starting point, the following section starts by detailing what it is to live in a partially non-sensical world.

5.1.1. Living in a world of non-sense

To live in the world is to experience ongoing non-sense as a pervasive part of our daily lives (Dibitonto, 2014). Simply speaking, we either make sense of something, or it remains non-sensical to some degree, remaining at the periphery of understanding and meaning. Practically, this is just part of being human, as it is impossible for an individual to make sense of all aspects of life, physical or imagined. Consequently, life can be considered an endless process of trying to make sense of ourselves and our external/internal reality, with success mediated through our extant knowledge and the situations we encounter. Importantly though, and in day-to-day living, most non-sense is at a relatively low level, as to have lived in the

world is to have some grasp of it. This being the case, we can generally move through life with little threat to our extant sense-making models or notions of self. Importantly, and while we all have a shared experience of the world, i.e., we all see the same types of objects etc., what I find non-sensical, you might not, and vice versa. While there is much that we do not know about non-sense, it seems fair to say that our ability to process non-sense rests on how well we can operationalise our extant mental resources and innovate where necessary. Helping us start to understand this arena, Felix (Church A) mused:

> I've spent a few years being hit by ayahuasca, and although I'm not a philosopher by trade, it has made me think about stuff I'd never really thought of before. In my opinion, the challenge of ayahuasca is our ability to understand what we see, and of course, what we feel, as the two are hand-in-hand my friend. The more I've seen in those foreign lands of ayahuasca, the more I've thought about what it is to understand anything. Again, this has been recent thinking on my part, but go with me on this one. When I first started out with this whole religious thing here, I often found myself staring at things that I had no idea about. Yeah, yeah, I got the basics. I've lived on Earth for a while and know the basic rules of identifying something. So yeah, I can tell you the basic properties of anything. Sizes, shapes, colours, movements and whatnot. [Pause]. In a way I think I always understood something of what I saw, even when I didn't get what was happening. I always knew something, even if it was nothing more than a colour. Course I did, I'm alive and can see. What hit me was that the real problem is understanding what it means. That ain't no easy thing. So even if I saw me with an Eiffel Tower on my head in a vision, I can describe it, but am lost about what it means.

Such comments highlight how the participants were struggling with the nature of reality, and were grappling with previously unconsidered aspects of being, due to the emergence of ayahuasca non-sense. At the heart of this issue, and as Felix (Church A) just argued, what does it mean to make sense? Is it enough to atomise perceptual phenomena by size and shape etcetera? And then slowly build a mental

picture based on visual characteristics? Or is the point of sense-making to arrive at meaning? Furthermore, we might well ask how much meaning is needed for sense-making to have been achieved? While these are difficult questions to ask, they are highly relevant to how we understand non-sense.

Broadly speaking, our ability to make sense is of course aided by elucidating simple perceptual phenomena, such as colour and shape, but typically requires meaning to be made. In this way, being able to describe something might not be enough to make sense of it, particularly if there is no meaning. For example, and commenting on this, Elijah (Church B) said, 'well when I see a tree, I know it is a tree, and it is unimportant to my life, so I move on. If it does something odd, it makes no sense to me'. In this example, we see two levels of understanding, with the first requiring labelling to make sense of the phenomenon itself, and the second needing to make sense of context i.e., a greater meaning. If, either of these sense-making aspects fail, we are left with non-sense. My conversation with Joe (Church C) highlights how she had come to understand day-to-day non-sense, alongside her non-sensical experiences before ayahuasca:

> Joe: When I think back, I don't think I'd paid much attention to things in life before ayahuasca. The confusing things that is. It was like being on autopilot, wandering around and sometimes thinking about stuff, and sometimes not. [Pause]. Thinking back, I've certainly had my run ins with the unexplained, utterly bizarre and surprising stuff. We can run away from what we don't understand. This is the advantage of being an adult. [Pause]. The problem is when we can't, and we have to face it. Hmm, let me give you an example. When I first started learning to draw I couldn't. I was absolutely useless. It scared me no end putting pencil to paper. Even though I was scared, I kept trying and got better. Then I was doing it without even thinking it.
>
> Author: So, you became more relaxed?
>
> Joe: Yes, absolutely! My body felt perfect and just knew what to do and my hand would glide across the paper doing what I wanted, and it all made sense. Mmm, not like doing maths though.

Author: How do you mean?

Joe: I am useless at maths, just can't do it at all. It terrifies me. There is nothing worse than seeing some horrible equation. If I had to try to solve it, I'd just panic. I'd feel sick to my stomach, my head would fog, and my body would shake. It's taking part in it that scares me. But fortunately, I don't have to. I can look at it and ignore it. I walk down the street and some sign says "$E = mc^2$". It is not important. Just noise in the back of my day. I can't understand any of it but who cares? I have no exam in it. It's not like back in the day when I had to deal with this at school. The fact it looks like gobbledygook is fine. [Pause]. Hmmm. Y'know, I've been around the world a lot and seen a lot. I've listened to languages I didn't understand, and that was ok. It was only bad when I had to understand, and I couldn't.

Author: Are you saying that your ability to choose whether to engage in something non-sensical is what matters?

Joe: Absolutely. Yes, exactly. As I just said, being an adult means I can run away and ignore anything too troublesome. In a way, I do have a choice for how much time and effort I make to understand something. Although I don't think I'd want to understand maths.

Author: Did ayahuasca change any of the way you think?

Joe: Yes, yes, it really did. It made me see that there is loads that I don't understand. Honestly though, most stuff I don't care about. It's only when I have to deal with it and can't escape that it's a problem.

Such comments were common amongst these three church samples, with most participants arguing that as adults, we tend to be free to leave non-sense unexamined, thus avoiding acute distress from trying to process what exists outside of our understanding and interest. Having said this, and reflecting on Joe's comments, it seemed that she had embraced the non-sensical through her endeavours in art, where her personal motivation to thrive in making sense of non-sense outweighed intense discomfort. Critically, this process was frequently described in embodied terms, with comments repeatedly argued that successful sense-making was capable of generating feelings of well-being, removing any initial stress. We might therefore speculate whether the committed individual can

to some degree acclimatise to the non-sensical, providing they are dedicated to positive outcomes from this process. However, and while it might be possible to sidestep the need to make sense at times, it must be noted that not all non-sense in life can be backgrounded, as sometimes non-sense befalls us, leaving us to try to make sense, irrespective of how we feel about it. Helping us better understand acute and unavoidable non-sense within her daily life, Deborah (Church A) said:

> I'd had my fair share of knocks throughout life. Who hasn't? My husband died several years ago and that rocked my world in the worst way possible. It ripped me apart, and nothing really made sense for a long time. I was lost and confused. My body hurt every day, and I cried for such a long time. But no matter how I felt, everyone goes through this to some degree. I don't want to belittle the horror of loss. But loss, mmm. Loss is, mmm, loss is part of living. As terrible as grief is, we all experience it and have done so for thousands of years. Even though I was alone and felt isolated from everyone and everything I loved during that period, I was able to reach out if I needed to. I realise now that I'd distanced myself from the world from this shock. Mmm, there are loads of books, websites, and even movies talking about how to understand all of this. Now I'm not saying that we do this easily. No! But it is the shared part of being alive to experience death. [Pause]. With ayahuasca you don't get this. If I had experienced something terrible in a vision and told my family they'd blame me for using drugs. Mmm, let me tell you though. Drinking ayahuasca can be just as painful as the things I'd seen before. Probably worse as nobody would understand why we are doing it, and so I keep silent outside of this church and suffer in silence. And in the Hell of ayahuasca, our bodies hurt, they really hurt so much.

We thus come to see that even acutely traumatic non-psychoactive non-sense can be embedded within rich socio-cultural sense-making frameworks that can help us to restore order to intense personal chaos. Or putting it a different way, even though some events might be new to us, the collective human experience leaves us with a

variety of cultural resources to try to make sense, irrespective of whether we are successful or not. Critically though, making sense of overwhelming non-sense often requires innovation and gap filling, as we step beyond our extant understanding of ourselves and the world, we live in. As Deborah (Church A) just highlighted, this can be particularly troublesome for ayahuasca experiences, as the exotic nature of this brew has resulted in few cultural sense-making tactics and solutions in regions such as the UK. Furthermore, and considering how ayahuasca use tends to be stigmatised, it has left users cut off from their wider social groups and more typical avenues for sense-making, leaving them to make sense as individuals or within their churches. Drawing this section to a close, I will now move on to unpack what ayahuasca non-sense is, in relation to visions and hallucinations.

5.1.2. Ayahuasca Non-Sense

Accepting that human life in all its forms is replete with non-sense, it is relatively rare to encounter prolonged and overpowering non-sense, as we often have the choice to background or ignore the incomprehensible. In comparison, and as we will now see, drinking ayahuasca deluges the mind and body with non-sense, undermining sense- and self-making models, while triggering the need to make sense of these otherworldly sections. As such, the following sections directly explore ayahuasca non-sense arising within visions and hallucinations, drawing out how it can be unexpected, enchanting, traumatic as well as overwhelming, leaving acute challenges for how to move on from these experiences. In order to better understand these aspects, I also draw on my autoethnographic experiences where perceived necessary.

5.1.3. Hallucinatory Non-Sense

Hallucinations are perceptual disturbances typically arising from an organic condition or the consumption of a psychoactive, and depending on the epistemological stance, either reveal true reality, or show perceptual falsehoods. Briefly, and for example, a materialist might regard hallucinations as distorting

perception, whereas a spiritualist may believe they reveal true reality (Shanon, 2010). Importantly, this study does not intend to draw out what is really real, but instead, seeks to understand how ayahuasca-based perceptual 'distortions' influence what the participants view as real, as they make sense of these experiences. Examining whether any participant was prone to hallucinations prior to this study, all confirmed that they had no underlying medical condition that had led them to experience hallucinations. However, and having said this, approximately 80 % of participants claimed to have had hallucinatory experiences, as a result of consuming ayahuasca or other psychoactives before joining these churches. Commenting on this, Steph (Church B) said:

> I'd taken a few other psychedelics before joining this church and I'd had ayahuasca a few times. I certainly wasn't naive to these things and yes I'd had my fair share of hallucinations. Mmm, but there was a difference here that is important. Taking magic mushrooms a few times or drinking ayahuasca two or three times in Brazil wasn't much. It was nowhere near like what we do here. Here its every week, and that leaves nowhere to hide. Plus, in Brazil I was only there a week or two. Here, there is a commitment to drink, and people would know if I was dodging it. [Pause]. So yeah, the hallucinations were rough before, but I forgot about them and let myself forget if they were hard. Here though, I keep seeing them every week. They continue like a soap opera. Often continuing, even if I have no clue what I'm seeing or what they mean. [Pause]. Now you might wonder why I am drinking ayahuasca still if I keep facing these problems. Well, it is fairly straight forward. Being here in this church, we do drink ayahuasca a lot. Ah, but we are in control, and get to set the agenda and are learning how to produce better visual experiences for ourselves through the environment we create during ceremonies. In the end we might not need to struggle as much.

Again, we see attempts to background prior hallucinatory non-sensical experiences as a means to mitigate psychological distress from incomplete or failed sense-making. While this strategy might have been efficacious for infrequent

psychoactive consumption, the ongoing nature of ayahuasca ceremonies in these churches, severely undermined this approach, leaving the participants continually immersed in varying degrees of non-sense. From a pharmacological perspective, hallucinations are likely to start after approximately 40 minutes (McKenna, 2004; Shanon, 2010), which was something all participants confirmed. The emergence of the ayahuasca state was usually pleasant, arising through a deep sense of enchantment and wonder about their lives, as Mary (Church C) described:

> This beginning of ayahuasca is incredible. Everything shines, shimmers and tells you something. There is nothing bad there. Nothing but magic and beauty. It's like being in a waking dream but having access to your memories too. During this period, your mind works, but you feel that you are slipping into a fairy tale. Like a slow bubbling stream, you drift along with what you see, consciously aware at all times, but not really in control over the experience. I've often felt the presence of the ayahuasca spirit even at this part of the ceremony, showing me beauty. [Pause]. Before the hard work begins that is. It's like a beautiful summer's day in an enchanted wood, mmm, while seeing the thunder clouds in the distance moving towards you. Mmm, but you don't really care at this stage. And at all times, ayahuasca is watching, waiting to invite us into her world.

Descriptions from this initial hallucinatory stage often focused on the beautifying nature of ayahuasca, and how it transformed waking life, filling it with meaningfulness. While the participants argued that this stage was akin to an otherworldly reverie, it is worth noting that all individuals argued that they tended to maintain their consciousness and memories. Critically, and even though these samples all claimed that journeying into enchantment was a spectacular visual experience, this quickly led to ongoing tensions about the nature of reality, as Stanley (Church B) commented:

> You have no idea how beautiful it all is at times. Well, actually, you probably do as you've done this before [Pause]. It is so beautiful isn't it? And like being in a dream, where everything is perfect and

> pleasant. It is the most wonderful thing I've ever seen and there is nothing like it. Hmm, but when it goes away, we become lost. I mean, how much of it was real? Is reality really like that? Am I seeing an illusion now while I'm awake? Or when drinking ayahuasca? I want this beauty in my life every day and wish reality was like this all the time. It is hard to forget utopia when you have experienced it so often. [Pause]. Ah, sadly, this magic time is only brief even within ayahuasca. In a way, perfection is only one cup of ayahuasca away, but I can't drink ayahuasca all the time. And set against such beauty, how can this world compete? I'm still shocked by what I've seen and what it suggests about life. I wasn't really prepared for seeing so many different things with ayahuasca. Seriously, the flowers sing to me, and I can hear every blade of grass growing. Literally, the world lights up with fairies, ghosts, spirits, angels and everything has a soul. I'd always wanted the world to be like this, and in a way, I got my dreams. Mmm, seeing everything like that really made me think about what is real. I became very confused and didn't know anymore. It was like having the rug pulled out from under my feet. And it took me a long time to sort myself out. Nobody can live easily if they have no clue what reality is. [Pause]. It really messes with your head.

We therefore see that even when hallucinations offer preferred views of the world, that they undermine accepted norms of reality, leaving the central question, what is really real? Discussing this further, Sally (Church C) argued 'These experiences left me as a rudderless boat tossed in the sea, with no anchor, continually being hit by waves showing me how what I thought I knew was wrong'. Within this powerful metaphor, ayahuasca hallucinations are presented as more than capable of crippling extant sense- and self-making models. This being the case, it was common to hear the participants ruminating on what, if anything, has an objective existence outside of the ayahuasca experience. For example, are these simply erroneous forms of perception induced by ayahuasca? Or do they reveal a deeper hidden reality? And why do hallucinations appear to operate under different rules to waking reality? Clearly, such questions were highly troublesome, made more problematic by

hallucinations often including profoundly painful memories, and reducing the ability for individuals to remain neutral to their perceptual experiences, as Daniel (Church B) stated:

> Ayahuasca is hard enough without it bringing back every memory I've ever had [Pause]. My dog died when I was a boy. It broke my heart, broke it. [Pause]. I never got over it. [Pause]. Then I started seeing my dog sitting with me during these sessions. It was him. Every detail was perfect. I also saw a shark swimming around the room. And diamonds dripping from the ceiling. I didn't know whether the other things helped me believe that it was really my dog or not. It looked and felt like him though. [Pause]. I cried for ages when I first saw him, and then cried after the ceremony. Did my mind make this up? Or a drug? Was the shark real? Could that be real too? [Pause]. Apart from ayahuasca, my life has roughly made sense. Ok, so there has been lots of stuff I was confused about. Hey that is everyone though isn't it. So, in normal life I go to the shops, and I walk in, and I'm in the shop. A herd of elephants don't just appear for five minutes and have a cup of tea with me and then turn into goldfish, do they? And this is what happens with ayahuasca. What does this say about ayahuasca? Are these things real? And where do they go when they disappear? And do they really transform into other beings? What is going on? I have no clue. And it leaves me massively confused about all of this. [Pause]. It is like a row of dominoes. Once our ideas about the world go, everything goes, and none of us have any idea who or what we are anymore.

Intriguingly, what is non-sensical appears to be influenced by the plausibility of a hallucination and what type of memory, if any, it is linked to. Problematically though, such issues were compounded by hallucinations not always obeying the natural laws of cause and effect, with mundane notions of reality being overtly violated. Critically, and looking at Daniel's comments, he clearly wanted his hallucination of his dog to be real but faced uncertainty due to the unlikeliness of a shark being present. In other words, and while Daniel could believe that his dead

dog had returned as an immaterial being, he was left struggling with the non-sensical nature of a shark breaching his expectations of how sea creatures behave. As such, we see that the context of a hallucination is critical, as are the preferences of the individual attempting to make sense. The question therefore remains about what is objectively real? Normal waking life? Or ayahuasca hallucinations? Table 15 details several of the most salient concerns raised by the participants regarding the nature of reality and hallucinations:

Situation	Exemplar non-sensical questions	Significance
Increased richness of perception.	'Why does the world look this way?' William (Church A). 'Is it supposed to look this way?' Daniel (Church B). 'Should the world look like this?' Mark (Church B). 'Does ayahuasca show us the truth of the world? Or obscure it through fakery?' Benny (Church A).	If sensory perception is a valid means to engage with and know the world, what does a shift in perception due to ayahuasca mean? In other words, does ayahuasca create a true or distorted sense of the external world? Within itself, this question of what is really real, and whether our senses are reliable dates back to the ancient world (Taylor, 2011). However, and while philosophers have spent millennia engaging with sceptical thought in relation to dreams and waking life, the participants, approached this arena through psychoactives. Problematically though, and with the participants having little understanding of philosophy, this was a particularly troublesome aspect.
Increased feelings of harmony.	'Why do I feel different in the ayahuasca state?' Stanley (Church B). 'I feel connected to everything, and this is how life should always be. So, why isn't it?' Sue (Church B). 'How do I enter this personal utopia permanently?' Shelley (Church C).	From an embodied perspective, such questions raised a thorny issue about what are the 'natural' and 'normal' states of being in the world. This aspect was particularly tricky as the participants argued that this was their preferred experience of the world, where everything was 'perfect', 'utopian' and their bodies existed in a state of 'bliss' without pain. Of course, such desirable experiences again led to consideration of what ayahuasca is, how it works, the truth of what it shows, and the deeper meaning of experiences encountered. As we might imagine, notions of being in the world had received little attention among the participants prior to consuming ayahuasca, meaning leading to a general poverty of understanding in this area.

Objects with inherent meanings.	‘Are these meanings there all the time?’ Peter (Church C). ‘What is real? I mean, why do chairs have personality and consciousness when I drink ayahuasca? What does that say about my normal life?’ Carly (Church B).	Here we see an intriguing philosophical concern about whether an object or being has an inherent meaning and purpose, and by extension teleology. While it seems fair to say that the UK is embedded within a materialist paradigm where objects and beings have no inherency, it is worth noting that such beliefs are more frequently found within older religious systems. Again though, we see ayahuasca challenging what is a ‘normal’ state of being, and what type of sensory perception is really real.
Insights abound.	‘Does the physical world have a consciousness?’ Alex (Church C). ‘I often wonder if the universe thinks and feels?’ Heidi (Church C).	Reminding ourselves that secular-materialist beliefs position the universe as hosting life rather than being alive or conscious, such concerns were certainly a departure from more common rationalist thinking. Critically though, and to suggest a conscious universe raises several questions about what it is to be alive with the universe, and just as importantly, whether the universe is capable of exerting agency in our lives. Furthermore, and considering that ayahuasca is typically framed as a deity, if not the supreme being, how the Goddess Ayahuasca fits within this cosmological view. Finally, and if matter is conscious, what this means for the ontological status of matter? To suggest that matter is by definition conscious leads to the question about what exactly matter might be? For example, does matter have a soul? Or a spirit attached? Such questions open the door to suggest matter is more than physicalism.

Entering a fairy tale.	‘What is normal life?’ Ian (Church B). ‘Should all life be like a dream?’ Andre (Church B). ‘Why isn’t my life like a fairy tale when ayahuasca is?’ Frank (Church A).	Here we see further epistemological, ontological and teleological questions being asked. Importantly, and by asking these questions, the nature of life is being considered, alongside whether the human journey should be replete with magic and otherworldly meaning. It seems that fairy tale experiences in the ayahuasca state make this an acute issue, and whether such lofty otherworldly goals can be realised in waking life.
Magic.	‘Does magic really exist?’ Daniel (Church B). ‘What is possible in life? Can I really do magic here like I can with ayahuasca?’ Irini (Church C). ‘I’ve always wanted to be a sorcerer, so can I be one or not?’ Rick (Church C).	In asking these questions, the validity of secular-materialist is being considered, and in particular, whether magic has any real part of the universe. With magic apparently being possible in the hallucinatory state, waking life is again challenged, for what is possible. Importantly, this question is even more acute, when we see that the participants were looking to wield magical powers, tantamount to sorcerers. As such, magic was not sought in the abstract, but rather in the concrete and demonstrable in waking life.
Previously unencountered energies.	‘Are the teachings of science real?’ Margo (Church C). ‘Is the world really just physical stuff?’ Ash (Church B). ‘What are these energies I see with ayahuasca?’ Joe (Church C).	Having witnessed magical energies within their hallucinations, we again return the critical questions about whether ayahuasca reveals the true nature of the universe or corrupts it. Furthermore, and if new energies are part of life, whether the scientific method should be rejected, for its failure to accept the truth of magic.

Table 15. Hallucinatory non-sensical concerns.

Examining Table 15, we come to see how enchanting ayahuasca experiences can quickly undermine extant beliefs in the universe as a mundane materialist phenomenon, challenging the degree to which sensory data is a reasonable approach to know the world or self. For this sample, such concerns were profoundly unnerving, as such ideas had only existed in a pre-theorised state before joining these churches. Finally, and drawing this section to a close, we must remember that even though hallucinations challenged what the participants thought was real, such aspects paled in comparison to ayahuasca visions, which are now discussed in the following section.

5.1.4. Visionary Non-Sense

In comparison to the external nature of hallucinations, visions occur when the eyes are closed, and as such require no visual input outside of the individual experiencing them (Shanon, 2010). This being said, and for those embedded within spiritual ontologies, it might well be argued that visions have an existence outside of the mind and function to reveal deeper hidden realities (Domínguez-Clavé et al., 2016). Chronologically speaking, ayahuasca visions occur after hallucinations, arising as individuals feel that their consciousness is pulled away from external reality and into a dream-like realm, as Bailey (Church B) highlighted:

> My visions always follow my hallucinations. When they start, it becomes hard for me to look out into the world. During this time, the world outside [external to oneself] becomes annoyed and threatening like I shouldn't be there. I keep feeling sicker, and every fibre of my body hurts until I get sucked into my visions. [Pause]. The more I resist, the crazier my outside world gets, and none of it makes any sense anymore. Complete madness I tell you. At this point I don't even know who I am, and I am glad to leave and slip into another realm. Closing my eyes, I feel better, and entire new worlds opened up, leaving me with a visual feast. My normal black space is replaced with pictures, stories, and new lands, waiting to be explored. Any serenity is misleading though as craziness is usually

around the corner in these new worlds, waiting to smash everything to bits and leave me confused as hell. The visionary stage is always the hardest, but is always the part that gives the most information about what we think we know.

Observing the participants during their ceremonies, it is fair to say that resisting the pull of inner visions can lead to extreme physical and psychological distress. This is typically evidenced through bodies shaking, sweating and individuals experiencing increasing external perceptual non-sense, with the solution being to consciously refocus attention into these visionary worlds, where intense sense-making can begin. Problematically though, few individuals consuming ayahuasca are adequately prepared to deal with the embodied and mental challenges arising during these stages. My conversation with Daniel (Church B) discusses these issues, and the difficulties of coping with and processing visionary non-sense:

Author: Can you tell me more about your experiences of the visionary state?

Daniel: No problem. [Pause]. Some of it was beautiful, little mini stories of me floating about as a cell in my own body, and up in the sky as a star. It was pure magic, and I felt connected to the universe. Although I never understood what it meant. [Pause]. Then I started to sweat, convulse, and felt ayahuasca gripping my body hard. Pulling me deeper inside this different world. Smashing broken images into my head over and over. Didn't make much sense to me.

Author: Did you understand any of what you saw?

Daniel: Bits. I recognised colours and all that. Shapes too but not much more. It was like someone had randomly jumbled everything up and was assaulting me with them.

Author: And did the ayahuasca visions stay like this?

Daniel: No, no, no. They changed after this. After the beginning it is often horrific destroying my poor mind with madness. Then it slows down and I can start examining this stuff properly.

Author: Can you tell me a bit more?

> Daniel: I could understand bits of what I saw. Like circles. But had no clue what they really meant. It was just weird. Mmm, and I kept thinking why am I seeing this? What is their relevance? Are they just a side effect of ayahuasca? Are they real? Do you know what I'm saying?
>
> Author: Yes, I know what you mean, and have had similar experiences.
>
> Daniel. Yeah, so, I've come to accept that visions can make no sense and can be complete gibberish. [Pause]. But what really confuses me is that as time goes on, entire lands and worlds form in front of my eyes. I've seen lands made of dead bodies, lands of fish wriggling and that is just the start. What does it mean? And where are these places? [Pause]. Before taking ayahuasca I'd never had to think of anything like this. I often find myself thinking is some of this just my imagination? Or is it all real? And as I just said? Where is it? In all honesty, I think the shamans in South America have it easier. [Pause]. They are lucky and grow up in cultures where they get taught all of what this means. Yes, yes, I know we are being taught by ayahuasca, but it is taking a long time. Ideally, we'd just have the answers, as it'd make our lives so much easier.

Often existing outside of perceptual understanding, visionary non-sense seems particularly troublesome, not only due to its immersive nature, but for the pressure it puts on the body and mind. From what the participants described, and my experiences, the visionary state is more intense, and harder to cope with, as sense-making can be limited to understanding simple aspects such as colours and shapes. For those within these foreign lands, the challenge is to make sense and attach meaning to what is viewed and heard. Commenting on this, Elijah (Church B) said:

> How well I understand things varies all the time. Yesterday, I saw all these swirling shapes and could say "mmm, yes, that's a blue triangle, and that is a yellow circle". No clue what they meant and there were thousands dancing about. [Pause]. Mmm. But y'know hey, maybe it meant nothing. But then I saw my house floating on

> the sea. I knew it was my house. But what on Earth was it doing there? And then all of a sudden, I saw a family of fish living in there. Completely mad I tell you. But there must be some hidden meaning? If it was just my mind being mad well fair enough. If it is a drug, well again, the drug was just being weird. But if it it's a supernatural message, and I think it is, then, then, then there is something I must understand. Maybe my life depends on it. [Pause]. What I've noticed though, is that the less I understand something the sicker I get. Believe you me, that is one incredible incentive to understand isn't it? It is a funny thing, as when I do, my body feels perfect. It makes me think that my mental activities are linked to how my body works.

We thus see the ontological status of ayahuasca as a key component of participant sense-making, with drug induced non-sense appearing to be unimportant, in comparison to supernatural non-sense, which might provide individuals with information about themselves and their journey through life. Furthermore, the ability to make sense is an embodied act, with success and failures in sense-making creating feelings of euphoria and pain, respectively.

Drawing this section to a close, the next section explores overwhelming non-sense in more detail, and in particular, focuses on how it can lead to cosmology episodes.

5.1.5. Cosmology Episodes

While we all experience trials and tribulations within our lives, few of us experience acute threats to who we believe we are and our place in the universe i.e., cosmology episodes. Within this section, this issue is explored through hallucinatory and visionary non-sense, which can easily trigger cosmology episodes, leaving individuals on an urgent journey to restore order to chaos (Orton & O'Grady, 2016). Critically, and as a starting point, it was necessary to explore whether the participants had experienced cosmology episodes prior to consuming ayahuasca, or whether it was something exclusive to these church activities. An exemplar conversation between myself and Anita (Church B) helps us understand this aspect:

Author: Have you ever felt that your life was out of control? Or felt completely lost in the world? [Pause]. Before drinking ayahuasca that is?

Anita: I think everyone feels it is at times. Breaking up with a boyfriend, failing an exam, losing a pet. All of this is devastating, and so depressing. It is truly heart breaking. But I never felt that I really lost control of things. I knew I always had support networks to guide me even through the most difficult times. Life is full of things to help us with everyday problems. In a way I've always seen myself as a fairly normal person. Fairly resilient, and I've survived like most people do.

Author: I see what you mean. How about with ayahuasca though? Has that been different?

Anita: Oh yes, Life smacks you about but ayahuasca takes it to a whole new level and kicks your soul. I never knew what it would be like drinking ayahuasca until I did, but I heard it would blow my mind. And it did. Over and over again. There are good reasons why I've stayed, but ayahuasca has rocked my world and destroyed my ability to think straight at times. [Pause]. Every time I drink it, I was left wobbling all over about who I am and what anything is. Maybe my problem was that I had felt certain about my life. I don't have much education or anything like that. And I went through life with, mmm, simple ideas I suppose. Yes, I'd say they were simple but certain. Ah, but ayahuasca gutted me like a fish, ripped my foundation out, and I was in a bit of a mess. Mmm, let me tell you, I'd always believed in an afterlife. All good people go to Heaven and bad people go to Hell. That was as deep as my thinking went [laughs]. You can tell I'm not a scientist or anything like that eh? Seeing what I did, I was left with one hell of a problem. How do I explain it? I mean, c'mon. I was completely lost and no idea what I was seeing. [Pause]. I suddenly realised that I had no real understanding about my life and how it would end, and now I was stuck with this fear of my own death. It chilled me to my bones. I

> couldn't sleep properly for ages. Couldn't eat or think about anything else. I'd wanted all the great bits of ayahuasca but not any of this.

Reflecting on this issue, there was little to suggest that the participants had experienced cosmology episodes before drinking ayahuasca, although all had suffered personal loss, trauma, and acute sense-making cues. Problematically though, and with ayahuasca being an innovative brew as far as the UK is concerned, sense-making solutions are not readily available and not easily found, leaving individuals to try to find ways of making sense, no matter how confusing as Craig (Church A) now explains:

> In ayahuasca, the normal rules of life disappear. Let's be honest here, most days you wake up on a morning and the world is the same as it was the day before. Of course, maybe something crazy will happen. But the rules don't change. I've never floated to the ceiling, or accidentally teleported to the shops. Here though, in these ceremonies, everything is up for grabs. Reality is always changing. [Pause]. Mmm, I've heard people screaming in our ceremonies before, ranting about demons, and having to relive their most awful moments from this life, over and over again. So, what is real? Umm, which world is real? I'd seen that physicality is real then spent ages trying to work out why I couldn't walk through walls. Mmm, once you've taken aya[huasca] this stuff will echo in your mind for years. And it undermines everything, till in the end you don't know anything anymore. [Pause]. I lost my way in the beginning. I kept asking myself, if ayahuasca is a drug how does it know me? Honestly, I feel that ayahuasca punishes wrongdoing, sin and bad behaviour. I really feel that I was made to go to Hell and that ayahuasca was watching me the whole time seeing how I was doing. If this is true, what does it say about everything? Does ayahuasca have power? Is ayahuasca conscious? What had I drunk? Shamans say that ayahuasca is a spirit. I became even more confused than I'd ever been. So, spirits can control my brain? And did this mean that

> spirits live in ayahuasca? Or is ayahuasca a spirit? Endless questions. I was so lost with all of this and started to get confused about who or what I was [sighs]. All of the things I'd taken for granted fell apart. [Pause]. Ah, I'd always been religious y'know, but I'd never seen a ghost or God before, and drinking ayahuasca I did. You cannot escape what you see.

Critically, asking such questions is hardly an innocuous act, and can easily lead to existential tensions as individuals increasingly feel a sense of helplessness, compounded by their inability to adequately make sense of these challenges. In turn, and facing these challenges, it was apparent that the participants had suffered a loss of meaning in their lives as social and ethnometaphysical norms broke down (Jackson, 2005). This is not to say that the participants had not experienced tragedies and acute shocks previously in their lives, but rather that ayahuasca exposed that the participants had an incoherent metaphysical view of their own being, which left them highly susceptible to existential crises and cosmology episodes. As such, perhaps we should not be surprised that the participants questioned their own existence, and whether life itself is an illusion, as highlighted by a conversation between JJ and Elijah (Church B):

> Elijah: Do you still worry that you aren't real? [Pause]. I do.
> JJ: Yeah, I've never gotten over what we've seen. It eats away at me, and I've really struggled these past few years.
> Elijah: Mmm, for me it was seeing ayahuasca distort this world. Even in my visions everything crumbled and rebuilt itself. I tell you man; I lost my faith in reality. The more I've taken aya[huasca] the more I've come to doubt my eyes and other senses of the world. People go around saying "seeing is believing" so what does that mean for us?
> JJ: Exactly! We have walked into no man's land, as it might not exist, and neither might we. Mmm. Ah, what if this is all some kind of dream even now? What is waking life? [Pause]. Do you ever feel that you no longer know if you are in a ceremony or awake?

> Elijah: Sure, thing buddy, I feel like this all the time. How am I supposed to go to work? I teach biology, and let me tell you, there are days that I think materialism is a hoax and my students are nothing more than spirits. Saying this at work would be career suicide wouldn't it? Keeping my job won't be easy, at least if I'm honest about my doubts about science.

We thus come to see how ayahuasca visions and hallucinations erode certainty in the ontological status of a materialist being, also leading to a loss of faith that we live in a purely/predominantly physical universe. Reminding ourselves that Elijah has a PhD in Biology, it is important to note that even his expert knowledge of materialist science seemed to provide little resilience against ayahuasca non-sense. Within itself, and over the past several years, I have routinely encountered scientists and engineers who have also struggled in this way, often rejecting former knowledge about the physical nature of reality. At the heart of this issue is what is really real? And whether we can really accept sensory perception as a valid means to know the external world? For individuals who cannot resolve these questions, it seems that they are destined to be engulfed within acute psychological distress and cosmology episodes, as Rick (Church C) described:

> Don't get me wrong, I love being here and hate it too at the same time. The problem with ayahuasca is that there's no middle ground. It's like everything is always breaking my head. I've spent ages trapped in a cycle of sadness and ecstasy. I became so listless at times, withdrawn from life and bored with society. Outside of this church I'm a recluse. How can I believe in any political or ideological system? It is all a lie. All a sham and hoax. I feel so connected with aya[huasca] and my new family here. I don't know how I am supposed to live anymore outside of here. I don't care about small talk anymore. And I avoid my former friends and family. I love them, I really do, but their lives are pointless. If there really is a forbidden fruit in the world, it is ayahuasca. See that should have been what they said in the Bible, "Adam and Eve drank ayahuasca and it gave them true knowledge, to understand they knew nothing,

and to understand the world they'd have to lose everything and hope for a better future".

Looking at such comments, revealed undercurrents of anxiety and depression amongst the participants, and while few seemed to want to leave their churches, their cosmology episodes severely undermined their ability to meaningfully engage in their former pre-ayahuasca lives. Most apparent was the loss of many former relationships and beliefs, with the participants tending to view them as limiting their opportunities with ayahuasca.

5.2. Summary

Throughout this chapter we have explored what constitutes perceptual non-sense, not only in everyday life, but in relation to hallucinations and visions arising in ayahuasca ceremonies. Importantly, we saw that while non-sense is a pervasive part of waking life, that in many circumstances, it is possible to background the unknown, consequently, leaving us with few challenges to our sense- and self-making. Having said this, it seems that non-sense only really becomes problematic when it is overt, undesirable and/or inescapable, necessitating attempts to make sense of it, as in the case of ayahuasca. Critically, and as we saw in this chapter, non-sense is highly personal and relative to the individual experiencing it, but having said this, there were common themes related to what made something non-sensical.

Examining hallucinations first, it is clear that they distort our outward perception of the world, inducing non-sense, and in so doing, challenging the validity of our senses and perceptual understanding. Concerns raised, tend to include, what is real? Whether hallucinations reveal a true reality? normally inaccessible in waking life? Or are they pharmacological falsehoods? Tricking our senses? As we might imagine, such questions were profoundly disturbing for the participants who had tended to assume that reality is what can be seen, at least before consuming this psychoactive brew. Not surprisingly, these experiences led the participants into overwhelming non-sense, coupled with ongoing struggles about whether

hallucinations had an ontological status outside of ayahuasca, and to what extent sensory experiences can be trusted.

Importantly, many of the concerns raised about hallucinations were also present with inner visions, which by nature were more immersive, and generally left the participants feeling more overwhelmed with non-sense. Problematically, many of the visions lacked coherence and meaning, with sense-making being limited to simple features such as colours and shapes. As such, there was often a poverty of meaning attached to visionary scenes, limiting the ability to make sense.

Considering the overwhelming nature of non-sense within visions and hallucinations we should not be surprised that they are a source of much anxiety and depression. But more than this, that these ayahuasca experiences can easily disrupt extant notions of self, while eroding reality-based norms, resulting in existential crises and cosmology episodes. At the extreme end of this phenomena, it was not uncommon for individuals to feel that they had lost any ability to know the world or themselves, and what is fact and fiction. How the participants attempted to address and resolve such aspects are examined in the next chapter, via individual, group and organisational sense-making.

Chapter 6. Making Sense of Ayahuasca Non-Sense

6.1. Introduction

Having examined the concept of non-sense, and how it is a continuous part of everyday and psychoactive life, this chapter considers how sense is made of non-sense through embodied social sense-making. As we will come to see, making sense of non-sense can be a complex, fraught, and contested process, with no guarantee that new sense will be made. To help our understanding of these issues, the first section in this chapter considers the difficulties for participants to feel comfortable in making sense, in 'embracing sense-making safe spaces'. Following this, my attention will turn to how the participants engage in restoring order to their personal chaos in 'developing resilience to cosmology episodes'. As these aspects are facilitated by beliefs in ayahuasca as a divine giver of sense, consideration is made of participants 'having faith in the goddess Ayahuasca' and the challenges and rewards of 'Listening to Ayahuasca'. Following this we will see how these church congregations work together to collectively make and codify doctrinal sense in 'negotiating the nature of reality'.

6.1.1. Sense-Making Safe Spaces

Working on the basis that ayahuasca can easily trigger traumatic non-sensical visions and hallucinations, the challenge facing the participants was how to make good enough sense of these experiences to meaningfully move on with their lives. Reminding ourselves that sense-making is an embodied social act, how we make sense is not independent of our environment or the people we interact with. As such, this section explores how people and places influence the sense-making process, while drawing out how controlling these aspects helps/hinders what sense is made. My conversation with Daniel (Church B) starts explaining this issue:

> Daniel: We quickly realised that if we were going to make a go of this new faith that we'd have an uphill struggle coping with

ayahuasca. Y'know so we'd got a place to do our thing, members, plants and the know how to prepare aya[huasca]. Making sure we'd mentally survive this magical little concoction was quite the other matter though.

Author: How do you mean?

Daniel: Hmm, well, think about it. You know what it [ayahuasca] does to you.

Author: I know it can be very challenging. But what were you having trouble with?

Daniel: The unwanted effects. The weirdness and how it knackers our bodies and minds. Can leave us in a stupor for months not knowing anything anymore. I think we all came to realise that we needed a way to withstand the darkest nights of the soul that ayahuasca brings. We all knew that ayahuasca would keep on hitting hard and the point was to have some defence against it. And as far as we could see, a defence is really getting to grips with what it is. Understanding it at a deep level, and what it means to be human again in this world. [Pause]. We wanted to look at the insanity of ayahuasca without going mad ourselves.

Author: [Pause]. Yes, I see. It sounds like a difficult task. [Pause]. I'm thinking. [Pause]. How did you start trying to make sense and understand all of this?

Daniel: We realised that the most important thing was to keep our church safe to explore our divine work with ayahuasca. We needed to be safe to dream and imagine. Let me explain. [Pause]. There are lots of prejudices against ayahuasca, and those who drink it. I made the mistake of telling my friends and family about my activities here, and I lost them. They don't speak to me anymore, saying I'm a drug addict. [Pause]. This really hurt me man, really hurt. It was worse as ayahuasca heightens our feelings and sensitivity to criticism. [Pause]. So, I needed to be away from their eyes to be free to find my own way with my new ayahuasca family. Together we could work with ayahuasca to uncover the secrets of the universe. [Pause]. This church has become a safe zone for us to all explore ourselves and

> the secrets of ayahuasca, outside of prying eyes. We are free here, apart from each other.

We thus start to see the importance of sense-making safe spaces free from unfavourable views of ayahuasca, shielding the participants from being labelled as immoral drug users (Siff, 2015). This is a critical issue when we consider that the participants claimed to have lost friends and family as a consequence of adopting this new religious practice, which is also an aspect commonly found within ayahuasca tourism. For the participants, these were acute concerns, further compounded by ayahuasca intensifying feelings of being othered, and the potential to experience paranoia. Not surprisingly therefore, these three churches sought to bracket their new religious activities from wider society, reducing the flow of negative sense towards these individuals, while creating opportunities to undertake exploratory and innovative sense-making, outside of cultural norms. Commenting on this, Margo (Church C) stated:

> Having this place to drink ayahuasca has been so important for all of us here. We don't get no criticism anymore from outsiders. Most people just can't look beyond their prejudices to accept that we aspire for love and truth. It hurts me, and it hurts us all when we try to meet with our families. They really don't get us anymore. We can't have the old conversations we used to. They don't realise that they are mistaken about everything. [Pause]. Ok yes, we are still learning here, but we are on the right path to salvation. [Pause]. We needed somewhere to speak without being condemned and to learn what ayahuasca was trying to tell us. [Pause]. My family don't like psychedelics. They never will. How can I talk to them about this properly? We all know there is something wrong with all of them. Hmm, I came to see that they are contaminated with demons. Infected by them. Possessing their thoughts, minds and hearts. If I meet them, I will be infected too. Everything we say is in opposition to their dark ways. It isn't just them either, it is the world that is unclean. Only ayahuasca purifies. I saw that in a vision, and it is true. I will not risk my soul for them. It is best I spend as much time here

> with those who are like me and are committed to saving themselves. My goodness, could you imagine what would happen otherwise, evil spirits would infect my body and mind.

Importantly, and while these samples had frequently complained about their new religious practices and beliefs undermining their relationships with friends and family, it was clear that the participants had been active in distancing themselves from non-church relationships. The more time I spent in these three churches, the more apparent it was that these groups were increasingly insular, focused on demarcating social life through an insider/outsider lens, with those outside of these churches were viewed as contaminated by malevolent spirits. Within itself, depicting outsiders as evil or possessed by nefarious immaterial actors is not unusual within ayahuasca communities (Dean, 2019), and functionally appears a simple means to segment sense-making within these churches from competing models of sense. Addressing these aspects, Rick (Church C) said:

> It was the craziest thing. Drinking ayahuasca showed me that everyone has spirits inside them. Kind of like possessing them. Mainly bad ones in people. [Pause]. Throwing up though, I saw nasty spirits ejected from people and me too [exclaimed]. It was terrifying. Dark shapes, with wicked faces and burning red eyes. Screaming as they left people. T'be honest with you, I see demons in people when I go shopping. Scares the Hell out of me. Y'see why I don't want to associate with the outside world. I need to keep away from the damned. It's important fellah. [Pause]. All this impacts on our ceremonies here. This is our space, and we don't want no monsters in our heads controlling our thoughts. [Pause]. We have all suffered so much to clean ourselves, and we will not invite evil back into our lives. No sir, no sir. [Pause]. Ah, mmm, we were talking about this a lot y'know. How spirits get in your head and influence your thoughts making you think bad things. So, when we were thinking about this, we need a pure area to understand all of the craziness so that we can get to Heaven and avoid Hell. Might sound odd, but we are committed to understanding ayahuasca and

> ourselves. To do this we need clear minds, pure hearts and no monsters within us. Y'see why I don't see my family much anymore? They could influence what I think.

Reflecting on such comments, we see how important spiritual cleanliness is for those making sense, and just as importantly, how demonic visions and hallucinations flavour sense-makers towards immaterial ontologies (Shanon, 2010). Importantly though, positioning their churches as clean and society as impure, suggests an almost Manichean binary of good and evil, as captured in a conversation between Heidi and Robin (Church C):

> Robin: Being outside of here scares me at times, there is so much evil about, isn't there?
> Heidi: Y'ah I know what y'mean. Remember we drank aya[huasca] last Saturday?
> Robin: Sure. I remember.
> Heidi: Well the day after I was going to a café and had to leave before I even went in?
> Robin: Why? What happened?
> Heidi: All I could see were demons dancing in there, and I knew I was better back here. It would've corrupted my mind and soul. Could you imagine how I'd been seduced if I had gone in?
> Robin: Yes definitely! And you must protect yourself. It is all of our safeties at stake here. Think about it. You get infected, and it would hinder all of our good work here.

Through this overt demonological lens, any mundane task outside of their churches was viewed as capable of corrupting mind, body and soul. Importantly, it seems that evil spirits can infect a host through close contact, leading to the corruption of the wider church membership, and hindering the congregation's ability to make preferred divine sense. Perhaps not surprisingly, these spiritual beliefs were underpinned by cultural Christianity, as Julius (Church B) commented:

> Most of us here were Christians at some point. Well, maybe not anymore, but we know the basics of Christianity. Everything is a war between good and evil eh? Yes, I'm sure that's how it works. We are the same here. I mean, this is how everything works. It makes sense if y'think about it. We pieced this together from our visions and our memories of the Bible and the Devil. Not that any of us read the Bible recently. We also read a lot online about evil spirits attacking ayahuasca users. Protecting ourselves became paramount. This church is our spiritual fortress. We know there is much evil outside, and we must stay away from it.

It thus seems that Christianity was a foundation to making sense, providing simple stories and concepts that could be re-imagined into new sense for these churches. Yet, and having said this, there was little to suggest that the participants had a working knowledge of Christianity, and instead, used archetypal stories to make sense that was good enough for their needs.

Drawing this section to a close and having overviewed the creation of safe sense-making spaces, the next section moves on and considers how the participants attempted to deal with the chaos of overwhelming non-sense, by looking at how cosmology episodes were more explicitly dealt with.

6.1.2. Developing Resilience to Cosmology Episodes

When we consider that cosmology episodes are relatively rare in daily life, perhaps we should not be surprised that these participants lacked adequate mental and linguistic sense-making resources and processes to adequately resolve their acute experiences with ayahuasca non-sense. Yet, and as we shall see in this sub-section, the participants did not capitulate in front of overwhelming non-sense, but instead, sought to make sense of it. Helping us understand this issue, Daniel (Church B) commented:

> Taking ayahuasca has left me in a right mess at times having panic attacks. [Pause]. Terrifying me for weeks or months. Mmm. Y'know, what is real and all that? And the more uncertain I get, the sicker I feel. I've spent many a night shaking, gasping for breath while fearing I don't exist. This has left me questioning whether spirits exist? And if you think about it, what really happens when we die? I never used to think about any of this and taking ayahuasca forced it on me. I had to resolve it as I felt I was going completely mad and was no longer in charge of my life. My family and friends could no longer help me, and I needed a new way forward. It has been so heart breaking leaving everyone I loved behind. I suppose it is worth it. It is horrible though and there are so many times I want to go back to how it was. How can I though? How can I go back to a false way of living that I no longer believe in? I wanted a way to survive and thrive in this.

Such comments were common amongst the participants, often revealing acute existential fears discursively presented as feelings of madness, helplessness and pointlessness, which all appeared to be foundations to cosmology episodes. When we consider the intensity of these issues, it is not surprising that all participants expressed an urgency to resolve these tensions through their churches, as Felix (Church A) argued:

> My past is gone, and what keeps me going now is this group. [Pause]. My church. [Pause]. We are a family now. Without them I couldn't cope with the horrors of ayahuasca. This is a new church, and we are all learning the way, all facing uncertainty together. We truly are pioneers in the spiritual wilderness, grabbing and fighting for every scrap of salvation we can find. [Pause]. When I came here, I thought I'd do this as a hobby, kind of like a Christian who goes to church every week and then ignores it the rest of the time. Ok, well not exactly. I'd wanted big changes for me, never thinking I'd have to change most of my life. It was the minutiae that stunned me. Within the first weeks and months I abandoned watching the news, talk

shows, reading social media stuff on Facebook. All the things I'd loved became dead to me. I saw them as corrupt and tempting me into damnation. I had to find new answers. And I found them with my new family and with ayahuasca.

In practice, it often seemed that the churches were the foundation to starting to develop resilience to these existential terrors and cosmology episodes. As such, rejecting the outside world was not just a way for the participants to distance themselves from evil spirits, but a way to background pervasive common sense social discourses that position psychoactives in a negative light, and that might contradict emerging sense. Discussing this, husband and wife, Caius and Deborah (Church A) said:

Deborah: Ayahuasca is all about family, and close connections to other people. Anyone not doing what we do is a severe risk and it's not worth the hassle.

Caius: Exactly. [Pause]. I came here for a year, and then we started dating, and it was simple. You came here and joined this church with me or we broke up. I hated not being able to share myself with an outsider.

Deborah: I'm so happy I did, as I have everything I need here. It was hell in the beginning. As time went on, coming here gave me strength. Gave us strength, and a place to reject the world in favour of our new religion. It became a real calling for us. And we are so much happier for it. It hurt leaving everyone behind, and I miss them. I just hope they can find a way to come here and be with us. Life is short and the afterlife is long.

Caius: Yeah, I agree with you. In the end though, it gets easier doing what we do. The body and mind adapt and that creates a foundation to start understanding what we see.

Deborah: Very true. In a way, our bodies get used to being roughed up. Vomiting becomes easier and even though the visions can still be horrific and plague our minds for months, we lose a lot of fear as we just get used to what is happening.

It is interesting to consider that the participants frequently argued that part of dealing with their acute tensions was through developing a physical tolerance to the general experience of the ayahuasca state. Again, and reflecting on my ayahuasca tourism, this was often a common theme, and typically considered the first serious step towards sense-making. Having said this, and without dealing explicitly with non-sense, individuals would likely remain beholden to the negative effects of this psychoactive, as Anita (Church B) commented:

> Coming here I lost my way completely. For months I thought my microwave was an evil spirit and would get me with evil energies. I saw it in a vision here, y'see. In the end I threw it in the bin. My friends outside of here thought I was mad as I avoided microwaves. Mmm, even I was questioning if I had lost my mind. It was my paranoia that kept making me fall apart. Everywhere I went I saw spirits, good and bad. I just couldn't work out what was true. This made me feel sick as it was so hard to accept if everything was driven by spirits. [Pause]. So why did I stay? I didn't have to [laughs]. I suppose the promise of ayahuasca was too spectacular. For all the crazy stuff, I came to see that it is all about eternal life. I saw in my visions what happens to people who reject truth and salvation. Hell awaits them and it is pretty nasty. I kept seeing this, as well as Heaven is for people who behave, and I liked it. [Pause]. We really supported each other at the beginning, and we got used to hugging each other lots, and talking all the time. The elephant in the room was that we needed to understand what we were seeing. Only that could save us.

While working together as a community was clearly beneficial to the participants, and facilitated an overall sense of wellbeing, it appeared to be driven by a need to deal with cosmological crises which threatened to engulf and destroy these new churches. As such, it was time for the participants to build more coherent shared sense, with the foundation being faith in ayahuasca as a supernatural being.

6.1.3. Having Faith in the Goddess Ayahuasca

While few studies have directly engaged in examining how cosmological tensions are negotiated and resolved as an individualistic or social endeavour, there is growing support that religious sense-making is a means to return order to chaos (Orton & O'Grady, 2016). As such, and in this section, we will see how religious sense-making functions to bridge gaps of misunderstanding, thus allowing sense to be made of non-sense. Fundamental to this pursuit, is the question about ayahuasca's ontological status, and for example whether ayahuasca is best considered a plant, drug, or immaterial actor. This conversation excerpt between JJ and Seb (both Church B) captures this aspect:

> JJ: I spent such a long time trying to find out what was really causing all my confusion. I'd pickled my brain about whether ayahuasca was just a drug or a real gateway to the supernatural and true reality, if you get me?
> Seb: I know. We all got confused about this.
> JJ: Then it hit us. The only important question is. What is ayahuasca? I mean, exactly what is it?
> Seb: Exactly! We aren't asking "what is the molecular component of molecule *x*?" [altered voice]. We had to brave the only question of any importance, as you said. And ask, what is it? Is it some drug? Is it a spirit? Answer this and everything else falls into place.
> JJ: Yeah, you are right. But none of us had expected that ayahuasca is really a spirit, a deity. In fact, a Goddess, guiding us to salvation and our place in Heaven if we accept her and purify ourselves.
> Seb: I can't believe how long it took for us to see the truth of the matter that she must be worshipped. She is our salvation. As soon as we saw that we knew that giving everything up was worth it.
> JJ: I have faith in her now. I will not risk her punishment by ignoring her. Although I have to be honest, I have wondered how she exists in this drink if she is a spirit.

Such comments reveal that how ayahuasca is positioned ontologically undergirded all other aspects of reality for these participants. For example, and by positioning ayahuasca as an immaterial deity, the participants embraced an overt spiritual philosophy to make sense of the universe and themselves. Problematically though, and as JJ said, the participants frequently struggled to account for how an immaterial being might occupy this otherworldly brew. Broadly speaking, this confusion appeared a consequence of not understanding extant philosophical depictions of how spirits might exist within a material universe. Moving on though, depicting ayahuasca as a deity, participant writing tended to capitalise Ayahuasca as a proper noun, which is a convention I have followed in this thesis, to distinguish the brew from the spirit. Drawing out the characteristics of Ayahuasca, she was always referred to as a feminine spirit, taking on an archetypal role as the mother of the universe, with maternal instincts to her children in these church congregations. In a world where traditional clergies are frequently struggling to 'sell' deities and religious beliefs (Brown, 2009), the attraction of accepting ayahuasca as divine motherly figure was heavily supported by an ability to commune directly with her, as Joe (Church C) argued:

> Why don't people believe in God? They can't see him of course. Can't speak to him. Or if they do, it is all in their imagination, or they have to read old books. If a being is real, it has to be possible to speak to them. I've spoken to the goddess Ayahuasca, and I know she is real. She talks to me and helps me. Oh, you might think that I'm inventing this, or it is the effect of a drug. Let me tell you buddy, drugs can't trick me this easily. I know it is real, as I'm not smart enough to fake this, and drugs aren't good enough to create a believable being in my head. Why would a drug do that? And why does everyone here see the same things? So, it must be true. And whenever I want to speak to her, all I need do is drink. This is a proper relationship. No dead books here. When I want to speak to my goddess I do. One cup of this special tea and I can chat to her all day. Can you see now why we are the only true religion in the world? Only our religion gives us access to this.

Through this epistemological lens, knowledge is achieved through the senses, at least in relation to what is perceived during the ayahuasca state. For the participants, being able to 'speak' with Ayahuasca mitigated the need for blind faith i.e., fideism, and was an attractive proposition for those who struggled with more traditional religions being unable to provide sensory validation. While we might wonder why the participants developed faith in ayahuasca as a deity and not as a drug, the common answer in all three churches was plausibility, in that the samples doubted their ability to mentally conjure a divine being with apparent agency, i.e., an infallible being cannot imagine the divine. This was generally coupled with arguments being made that the intricacy of visions and hallucinations was believed to be more than a drug could induce, or the participants could (un)consciously construct. Within itself, and irrespective of the truth of the matter, this view of the goddess Ayahuasca simplified sense-making, while starting to draw an end to acute inner tensions regarding the nature of reality and themselves, as Irini (Church C) said:

> We were all desperate to bring an end to our suffering. It had gone on for far too long and there was no end in sight. So, we talked about it. And people started saying that maybe ayahuasca was like a spirit being. We saw something on YouTube about that too. Like ayahuasca is a female spirit and goddess. A few of us said that they'd seen that in their visions and ayahuasca talked to them. I wanted to believe. [Pause]. Do you understand what it means if they were right? We grasped it straight away, that we'd found the equivalent of the holy grail, we'd found the only real religion. We'd found the divine. Wow! [Exclaimed]. Let me tell you that was amazing. Who wouldn't want that? The goddess, literally in our church. Crazy but true. We wanted to believe and we started focusing our visions on meeting her. Over time more and more of us found her. The best part was that when we realised what ayahuasca is we knew we couldn't be drug users.

While there were clearly initial doubts amongst some of the church members, it seems that beliefs in ayahuasca were facilitated through cultural depictions of

ayahuasca as a deity and aided by church members who had encountered such beliefs in their former tourism. Furthermore, and from the perspective of social standing, positioning ayahuasca as a spirit mitigated any personal stigma that ayahuasca is a drug. The role of faith in this act of sense-making was explained by Deborah (Church A):

> I'd been a pagan for years and had faith that spirits existed. But let me tell you, seeing them is very different to having unsubstantiated faith. Seeing and speaking to Ayahuasca gave me great strength to change myself and have proper faith in what is real. For years I'd meditated and tried to speak to spirits and sometimes I heard a voice in my head. That might've just been me though. Ayahuasca had a different voice and a distinct personality. I could feel her. Even though I didn't always understand what she said or what I saw, I had faith that I would in the end. What mattered was following a true teacher, even if this was just suffering and drinking more for the time being. It helped me come to ceremonies as I came to see that I was taking another step forward each day. I believed that with time everything would be clear.

In a society that increasingly positions personalised religion as a means to achieve the otherworldly (Partridge 2005), we come to see the participants almost booking appointments to speak to their goddess. This is certainly an unusual religious proposition, as few congregations can claim perceptible access to divine beings just by drinking an unusual cup of tea. Although, and having said this, the Christian Eucharist for example supports the notion that drinking wine and eating bread is to embrace a transformational mystery, where these sacraments become the body and blood of Christ, allowing the faithful to commune with the divine (O'Carrell, 1982). Discussing this Gary (Church C) said 'Ayahuasca reminds me of the Eucharist. Mmm, even though Christianity promises magic, you can't see it, it doesn't happen. Ayahuasca genuinely delivers.' While I doubt that many theologians support the Eucharist as a form of magic, it seems that the participants were well aware of this competing drink, and how, according to them, it fails the sensory validation test, for any change taking place. Taking this approach, ayahuasca surpasses 'competitor'

claims, allowing the participants to achieve a sense of certainty in their actions and beliefs, through adopting ayahuasca as their goddess, as Andre (Church B) mentioned:

> Coming to see ayahuasca as our spiritual mentor, guide and goddess removed my doubts. She is wise and never wrong. Getting her to speak in-depth can be hard though, as she often speaks in images, creating stories in our minds. [Pause]. Oh, mmm, I suppose what matters is she gave me confidence to keep drinking her and going through this pain. She gave me a hardened belief that things would get better and all of this would be worth it. Honestly, that was worth its weight in gold as it let me sleep again. Maybe all we need in life is something to believe in, and that helps us get through the storms. For me, this was ayahuasca, and I saw the difference here for all of us. As we came to terms with what ayahuasca is we all felt better. How could we not when we have a goddess backing us. It really helped us survive what everyone else in society says about psychedelics, and it means that I'm always right. If Ayahuasca says it, well, [pause], well, it must be true.

Feeling validated in their beliefs appeared to be a key part of reducing psychological trauma, while allowing the participants to feel spiritually elevated above the 'sinful' populace. When we consider the distress that the participants had felt about losing their past relationships and social norms, positioning ayahuasca as a divine influence refocused sense-making towards more positive future outcomes. Finally, and drawing this section to a close, we have seen the importance of ayahuasca to participant sense-making, as an individuals and in collective practice. Therefore, the next section moves on and examines how the divine nature of ayahuasca was a core part of how the participants made sense of reality as a spiritual endeavour and focused on bringing their cosmology episodes to a close.

6.1.4. 'Listening' to Ayahuasca

Developing faith in the goddess Ayahuasca clearly allowed the participants to develop what they claimed to be a deeper communicative relationship, seemingly well suited to making sense of visionary and hallucinatory non-sense. As we will see in this section, this was a fundamental process of making new sense about the nature of the universe, as explained by Mary (Church C):

> The insanity had gone on for too long. We all just wanted peace and some respite from what we were seeing. Don't get me wrong. We didn't want to stop taking ayahuasca, as that was giving us great insights into our lives. We had to find a way of coping with the craziness of each session. [Pause]. We had done well to start to get to grips with acknowledging ayahuasca as a spirit, helping us through life. The next stage was to understand the crazier bits of our visions and relearn what reality is. [Pause]. It might sound kind of stupid but having some simple idea of whether anything is real is kind of important if you think about it. [Laughs]. Yes, I'm laughing but I need to know whether my sandwich is real and whether everything else is. Why you might ask? Because all of this matters for how I live my life and whether I can get salvation or not and the afterlife I want. According to Ayahuasca, health is determined by what we think, say and believe, kind of like magic. So, this really matters. This ain't no joke friend.

Listening to the participants speak, it was clear that they were wrestling with several intertwined supernatural and magical themes related to what the universe is. Importantly, and while all participants argued that the nature of reality had been of little interest before taking ayahuasca, it quickly became an all-encompassing aspect of their lives in order to understand hallucinatory and visionary non-sense. It is thus possible to view the consumption of this brew as a reciprocal act of breaking and remaking sense, where hallucinations and visions generate non-sense, but experiences of the divine Ayahuasca provide preferred sense of the universe, as detailed in my conversation with Felix (Church A):

Author: Can you tell me a bit more about how you tried to work with the goddess Ayahuasca to understand your experiences?

Felix: Sure thing man. [Pause]. Not only did our bodies acclimatise to the shock of shaking, shivering and vomiting. But we'd had time to think and talk about what we were seeing and our fears. Some of us had also started looking online at what other groups were saying. Of course, Ayahuasca was helping us too. Really, this was where we got our knowledge from. Everything from this world, here, is likely to be tainted. Only Ayahuasca provides truth.

Author: Ok, I think I see what you mean. It sounds like you searched in a lot of places to understand ayahuasca?

Felix: Oh yes. We did and do. We used whatever we could to bring an end to our suffering. Over the past years though we got better and listened to Ayahuasca more. Although, there are often several accounts of what she tells us, told by different church members. We try to pick what is best for us. If we like it, it must be true.

Author: How did you pick?

Felix: There was a lot of disagreement over things at times. [Pause]. Hmm, maybe I was wrong to say pick before. Mmm, well we did pick what we wanted to believe but only because we were guided by the spirit Ayahuasca. So, yeah, we avoided picking the wrong thing.

Author: Did you ever pick any view that you didn't like?

Felix: Well not really. There were disagreements of course. What mattered was getting to the truth, and if we liked it and ayahuasca condoned it. Well then it is true isn't it? You can't argue with Ayahuasca. Hey, let me tell 'ya, if we don't do what Ayahuasca says, she will wrack our bodies with pain in the next session.

Author: Sorry, just to clarify, how does Ayahuasca condone something?

Felix: Oh, yes. I suppose there are two ways. The first is if my body feels better then it has to be true. And the second is if it fits with anything I understand.

We therefore see the participants taking an embodied approach to sense-making and using personal well-being to validate truth. This was alongside coupling new sense with previous knowledge. In this way, we might view the participants as engaged in an ongoing process of reshaping their sense-making models, adjusting them with preferred views of reality while justifying this act by claiming that ayahuasca was guiding their decision-making processes. Looking at how cosmic sense was made of non-sense, Joe (Church C) argued:

> I'd seen a lot of stuff I didn't understand. Strange colours, landscapes and spirits. Couldn't work out what I was looking at. And sometimes I saw short stories that confused me no end. [Pause]. Taking more ayahuasca, I started to see that this is all part of the alien landscape of ayahuasca and that understanding it doesn't always matter. I came to relax and take a longer-term view that I'd understand in the end. [Pause]. In my opinion ayahuasca breaks your mind with the weird and wonderful. Ok? Then we lose any ability to understand anything about our lives. See? This is all part of the magic of Ayahuasca though. We are being guided to understand. And we won't understand everything on day one. As soon as I realised that I was more relaxed knowing I will understand it when I'm ready to. All of this is the will of Ayahuasca. Who am I to challenge her wisdom?

Like the approach used by the participants in their everyday lives, part of the solution to making sense of non-sense was the potential to leave some sense-making unfinished. Practically, and irrespective of the actuality of the matter, this temporary solution was an act of faith, requiring belief that Ayahuasca would eventually provide further sense-making truths to those worthy of her consideration. We thus come to see an increasing use of religiosity within participant sense-making, and the reliance on supernatural themes, as Ray (Church C) explained:

> I think most of us here had wanted to believe in spirits and the supernatural before coming here. Ah but you know how it is. You go to work, eat pizza and watch TV and the supernatural falls away

> and seems a bit silly. Taking ayahuasca gave us the strength to follow our beliefs and accept the truth of the universe. That the universe is alive, and full of spirits. Both good and bad. That Heaven and Hell are real and attainable. When you see the universe like this, you come to understand it. There is a sense of peace. I felt happy and it was like coming home. Accepting that everything is alive and has spirits in it. A truly conscious cosmos. I like the sound of that and need to write it down. Hah. Anyway, what I'm saying is that reality isn't really material. What matters is the supernatural. This is what drives the universe and us. It animates us, gives us life and brings creation to life. It leads us on a cosmic dance throughout all time. Except for those who don't believe this as they are dead inside. And Ayahuasca is the driving force in all of this. And the only way you know anything at all is through her.

Finally, we see these churches coming to depict reality as a purely supernatural endeavour, taking an animist and pantheist view of the universe, driven by the divine agent Ayahuasca. Reminding ourselves that Europeans tend to believe in pre-theorised notions of materialism (Charlton, 2007), albeit not devoutly, or exclusively, we again understand why the participants removed themselves from contradictory sense found within wider society, to pursue their supernatural beliefs. Yet, and with all participants claiming to be in contact with the goddess Ayahuasca, we should not imagine that sense-making is uncontested or without challenge, as we shall see in the following section.

6.1.5. Negotiating the Nature of Reality

Within organisational life there are often multiple levels of sense in operation at any one time, ranging from what an individual prefers, to what the group considers acceptable (Purchase et al., 2018). As such, different views of reality tend to be in an ongoing state of negotiation as sense-making models are continually reconstructed to meet the challenges of daily life, and the deeper ethnometaphysical goals of the organisation. Helping us understand this issue, Sylvia (Church A) said:

> When you think about it, our church rules are the foundation of who we are and what we believe. They are what we live by, and we can't afford mistakes over what they are. Of course, we all worked on them together to help us achieve salvation, spiritual healing and a route into the afterlife. Our shared belief is a testament to this spiritual place and work towards bettering ourselves. [Pause]. Our beliefs are guided by our goddess who is alive. It isn't some crusty old book that you pull out once a week like in Christianity. [Pause]. Mmm, you would be wrong to think we don't fight, and you have seen things get heated here. [Pause]. We fight because it matters. Just because we all speak to Ayahuasca doesn't mean that we all get it right. In fact, people get it wrong, and the challenge is to help them get back on track. It's the interpretation where there's a problem. And everyone struggles with this. Even I do.

Importantly, such views tended to be echoed throughout the three samples, often coupled with concerns about erroneous sense-making misleading these churches away from the divine message of Ayahuasca, and consequently hindering the potential for salvation. With Ayahuasca's sense positioned as not only sacrosanct, but infallible, the challenge for the participants was how to convey perfect sense as an imperfect human. My conversation with JJ helps us understand this issue (Church B):

> JJ: Only those who follow the divine will of Ayahuasca have any right to speak here. [Pause]. The problem is that we are human, and we might misunderstand what she meant, even if we didn't mean to. There is a great danger in miscommunicating her will. It might damn us all.
>
> Author: How do you try and manage this?
>
> JJ: The danger is that someone chatters badly and we believe them when we shouldn't. Then our views of everything are wrong. Maybe it will sort itself out though, and Ayahuasca will help us get back to the truth if we wander off the right path. T'be honest though, none

of us here are perfect yet. We are still making mistakes and will do until we change ourselves properly.

Author: Can you tell me a bit more about this?

JJ: Yes, last week, I was arguing about a change we should make to the ceremony. It was my suggestion, and nothing to do with a vision. I couldn't help myself, and before I knew it, I'd said that Ayahuasca had told me. I know I made a power grab, and I shouldn't have done it.

Author: Does this kind of thing happen often?

JJ: I think it does, yes. Everyday I'm not perfect I can mislead people, mmm, deliberately or accidentally. [Pause]. The problem is that Ayahuasca shows us so much. The smallest story can become important. Every time we drink her, we see more about what the world is. Our visions vary though, and that might be that some of us are purer than others. Thing is, somebody must be wrong. You can't have two people with opposing ideas who are both right. [Pause]. All we have is a trust system at the end of the day. And we go with group consensus. Far from perfect, but if we lost that we'd collapse as a church. [Pause]. We're all just people and need more ayahuasca to purify us properly. Only when we become properly purified and remove all our sin will we be able to speak properly for Ayahuasca.

For all three churches, sense-making was thus an ongoing act of religious revelation, elucidating the cosmic plan for the faithful. Having said this, it was clear that sense-making was rarely viewed as fossilised, as instead, further insights had the potential to more fully explicate Ayahuasca's divine wishes. Problematically though, all participants recognised that being human limits the ability to discern the truth of visions and hallucinations, thus impinging on their communication of divine sense. As we might imagine, there was much consternation over this issue, and an attempt to protect core aspects of faith from duplicitous or mistaken sense being made and given, as Ian (Church A) commented:

> It took us a long time, but we came to see that Ayahuasca is the source of all things. Knowledge, life, consciousness. Only through

her did humans gain consciousness and develop higher levels of thinking and awareness. And from this we learnt how to work towards a brighter future through her teachings. [Pause]. Now that we understand this, we mustn't forget it, or let the world corrupt our understanding. Just living invites deception. [Pause]. Y'know, there are many things we are at risk of here. We all have different opinions. But nobody can reject Ayahuasca as our saviour and goddess. Honestly, such words would be an unforgivable sin. It is a rejection of us, our church and Ayahuasca. What matters is why someone did it. Was it a mistake? Or was it on purpose. Mistakes can be forgiven, mmm, but deliberate acts are pure evil and must be punished. For those who won't repent, we remove them. That is a last resort of course. In the interim, we ostracise and condemn anyone disagreeing with us.

It seemed therefore, that the greatest participant fear was Ayahuasca being rejected as the supernatural and epistemological source of all knowledge and route to salvation. Thus, these preferred aspects of Ayahuasca were concretised, and positioned as unchallengeable, suggesting a high-level of social regulation for what constitutes legitimate spiritual discourse, knowledge and behaviour. For those transgressing against such beliefs, condemnation was never far away, as my conversation with Shelley (Church C) details:

Shelley: Our church members here should follow the rules, making sure that they only think the right things. And never commit heresy or blasphemy. Being good will help us all achieve what we need. It will save our lives. Then again, sometimes people don't behave. [Pause]. They forget. Misunderstand. Or they do it by choice. These are all evils as far as I am concerned.

Author: Can you tell me more about this? I mean, why are these things evil? And what is evil?

Shelley: Ah, mmm, it is easy really. Ayahuasca shows us the way and we are in communication with her all the time. We drink her

> lots, so we are always in her presence, more or less. Therefore, mmm, anything outside of her guidance is evil.
>
> Author: I think this makes sense, but there is one bit I'm confused about. I've heard many people here say that you aren't perfect? So is it still evil if you make a mistake in what you say? Or what you do?
>
> Shelley: Yes! It is. And we must acknowledge our evil and remove it. Evil is the absence of good. And again, until we are perfect, we will commit evil. This is not an excuse though, as we must work harder and faster to remove this dirt in our souls. [Pause]. I need to tell you though, that anyone looking for evil will be kicked out of here. Rejecting Ayahuasca exposes people to demons, and evil energies. It isn't worth us risking our souls for a corrupt member.

We thus come to see that evil comes in many forms, existing as a privation of goodness, typically through rejecting Ayahuasca's teachings, potentially damaging all church members through an increased risk of demonic infection. While all participants accepted that they had not managed to pass a spiritual threshold allowing them to reject evil in entirety, they were expected to work at mitigating evil in their lives. These issues of spiritual cleanliness, evil, and purification will all be re-addressed several times in chapter 7.

6.2. Summary

Drawing this chapter to a close, we have seen the importance of these churches in functioning as sense-making safe spaces to facilitate more efficacious hallucinatory and visionary sense-making. This was through trying to restore order to chaos, while backgrounding acute tensions related to existential crises and cosmology episodes. As we saw, this was predominantly a religious process of developing faith in the goddess Ayahuasca, who was framed as a key part of what sense was made and given throughout these three churches. It was particularly noticeable that the three churches made highly similar sense about reality after consuming ayahuasca. This may be a consequence of having drawn on culturally similar depictions found

on online social media platforms that routinely position ayahuasca as a snake spirit, and capable of guiding individuals to Heaven or Hell. Furthermore, having potentially been influenced by former ayahuasca tourists, who had already made similar sense prior to joining these churches. Overviewing these beliefs, it was certainly apparent that the participants typically viewed ayahuasca as salvific in nature, and the only route to true knowledge. Thus, and not surprisingly, all other forms of knowledge became stigmatised, especially those that contradicted beliefs in the spiritual nature of Ayahuasca such as materialism. In this way, all three churches concretised overt supernatural sense-making models, with stigmatisation waiting for those who failed to adhere to these views of reality. Importantly, such beliefs were also regulatory in nature, allowing preferred otherworldly narratives to dominate these organisational spaces.

Chapter 7. Making sense of self

7.1. Introduction

As we move through the world trying to make sense of our experiences, we also make ourselves to varying degrees. Not surprisingly, the extent to which we can change who we are remains contested, with the 'solution' typically depending on which ontological system is used to define humanity (Charlton, 2007). With the participants viewing ayahuasca as a spectacular supernatural catalyst, we will see in this chapter how they attempt to transcend the limitations of material sense- and self-making, through embracing magic and the otherworldly, by asking, who do I want, and not want to be? As a starting point, therefore, this chapter first examines the participant drive for 'developing self-knowledge' from the ayahuasca state, alongside undertaking intense 'shamanic identity work' to claim an idealised notion of self. At the heart of this pursuit is the ability to achieve a 'magical nature of being', while functioning as a new type of priest class in direct communion with the goddess Ayahuasca. Following this, my attention turns to unpacking what the participants sought from ayahuasca in 'the teleological journey of mankind'. Finally, and while this chapter predominantly explores active sense- and self-makers, this last section also considers 'failures to make self', through the participants reflecting on members who have left their churches. As personal gnosis is at the heart of all of the sense- and self-making processes in this chapter, this issue is addressed in the following section.

7.1.1. Developing knowledge of Self

Having experienced the turmoil of ayahuasca non-sense, and collapse of extant sense- and self-making models, the participants were keen to restore order to personal chaos as quickly as possible. Importantly, though, and while profoundly traumatic, these acute challenges to themselves were an opportunity to reimagine what it is to be human within this cosmos. Problematically and as Daniel (Church B) mentioned, few of the participants had previously given much consideration to

who or what they were prior to drinking ayahuasca, and just as importantly, what limitations, if any, exist for being human:

> To my understanding, most people don't obsess about the type of person they are, or even being a person. You take these things for granted. Look at it like this, I'm me and saw myself in the mirror each day. I knew I had a heart and brain and all that. I was physical. Never thought about it much but liked the idea of having a soul. [Pause]. Then I drank ayahuasca and I lost any grip on being human. I saw that many conflicting versions of me so that I didn't know who I was anymore. Mmm, over time and in my visions I started to see my soul. It hit me that we are physical beings. Yes? [Taps his hand on his arm to emphasise physicality]. But we are also spirits. Mmm, yes. Our spirit is what animates us, lets us move, and is what is left behind us when our physical body dies. [Pause]. I didn't always know this, and only drinking ayahuasca confirmed this for me. I saw it repeatedly in my visions. Mmm, I also saw it during the beginning of the ceremonies when I looked around the room and saw spirits inside my friends here [during the hallucinatory stage]. Thinking back, I'd been to church and I learnt a bit of this there about the soul in the body. And lots of people say we have souls, and it is always on TV. But I did see it in my visions. And it was here [in the ayahuasca church] I learnt about it with my friends. [Pause]. We spoke about it every day as we all kept seeing this. Over time, we sat down and compared our notes from our visions.

Reflecting on such comments, we see ayahuasca visions and hallucinations being positioned as a valid epistemological route to achieve esoteric self-knowledge, particularly with regards to the essence of being human, i.e., having a soul. Just as importantly though, it was clear that cultural common-sense life was a key part of sense- and self-making, with simple knowledge from a variety of popular sources being used to scaffold new views. Reminding ourselves that the participants claimed to have had a poor understanding of being human before drinking ayahuasca, perhaps we should not be surprised that they drew on whatever

resources were available to aid their understanding. This conversation excerpt between Mark and Ken (Church B) further highlights these aspects:

> Mark: We have spoken about what we are for a while now.
> Ken: Yeah, I agree. And it has got easier. At the start we had a nightmare of a time trying to understand who and what we are. We thought we were just physical. Just our bodies. [Laughs].
> Mark: [Laughs]. Exactly, although I had wondered about my soul. [Pause]. The thing for me was how to understand what I saw with ayahuasca. It's one thing to say, "yeah I've got a ghostly soul" and another to really understand it.
> Ken: Totally get you on this. We all had this problem. Fortunately, we could all work it out together using what we already knew and what we read online.
> Mark: Quite. [Pause]. The great thing was that there was loads of stuff on ayahuasca sites, chattering about how we are really spirits inside our bodies. Our old Christian beliefs also gave us a better understanding about the soul. So, we figured this out.
> Ken: It wasn't us doing this though [exclaims]. It was Ayahuasca. She guided our thinking. We must remember that we don't make these decisions about what is real.
> Ken: Absolutely not. Ayahuasca always shows us the truth.

It is interesting to note that while the participants frequently cited external sources and collective church sense-making as part of their self-making, that ultimately, all knowledge was argued as coming from the goddess Ayahuasca. We might consider this a tactical move, whereby these church members could select preferred views of being, while collectively mitigating responsibility for what sense of self was made. Putting this more simply, and as Nick (Church C) said: 'if Ayahuasca says it, it is true, and we are not to blame. Now we can really explore who we really are'. Describing this exploration of self through ayahuasca further, Rick (Church C) argued:

> As much as ayahuasca had destroyed me, she also offered me liberation to really see myself for the first time. Mmm, this was a new start for all of us, to see who we were. [Pause]. To start, we only saw simple things like we are spirits inside a body. And I guess that as Ayahuasca is a spirit, that she speaks to us in our minds? I think we all agree with that here. But what else are we? If we had been wrong about so much of ourselves, might we find out who we are? I mean really find out? We were very hopeful. Thinking back, this was a very exciting time in our church, and we spent so much time trying to get our heads around ourselves. Ok, so yeah, Ayahuasca had broken us. But now was the time for some good building work, and we built ourselves. Every tiny part of ourselves was ripped apart and we used our visions to explore who we wanted to be. It was a dark time of revisiting painful memories and trying to free ourselves from all the horrible things that had happened to us. Soul building is no easy thing, but we made great strides forward, and in the end we created new positive stories for ourselves. True stories of course, and we asked ourselves the biggest question of all. Who are we really? [Pause]. We are shamans, serving Ayahuasca, on our way to eternal salvation.

Importantly, and while initial non-sensical ayahuasca experiences had undermined extant notions of self, it is interesting to note that the participants had come to seek cathartic outcomes, embedded within more positive outlooks (Frecksa, Bokor & Winkelman, 2016). At the heart of this growing endeavour was the belief that we are spirits using a physical body throughout our mundane lives, with eternal life being available for those willing to transform themselves through serving Ayahuasca. Yet, and as we shall see in the following section, claiming to serve Ayahuasca requires intense supernatural and magical self-making.

7.1.2. 'Shamanic' Self-Making

Within the arena of ayahuasca consumption, it seems fair to say that the best-known identity is that of the shaman (Kehoe, 2000), often fetishised (Jauregui et al., 2011) and positioned as capable of functioning as a magico-spiritual practitioner and walking in the mundane and spirit worlds (Thomas, 2015). With the participants being so keen to claim this otherworldly notion of self, this section examines what was sought from shaman self-making, alongside the general plausibility of achieving a spectacular transformation. Describing her attraction to shamanism, Evi (Church C) said:

> I loved the first shaman I had in Brazil. He was amazing. There was nothing he couldn't do. He was so different to anyone I'd ever met. A truly magical man. Moving through the spirit worlds, chatting to deities, and healing us mere mortals. Which is exactly why I wanted to be a shaman. When you think about it, shamans are respected and wise. I wanted that. I wanted their abilities. I want to be like them and have their power. [Pause]. I learnt about them from my time in South America, as well as chatting to the others here. Mmm, yeah, there is also a lot on YouTube about them too.

Listening to the participants speak, it was apparent that there were a variety of mundane and phantasmagorical motivations for pursuing a shamanic notion of self. Not surprisingly, participants with experience of shamans from ayahuasca tourism tended to be highly vocal about what a shaman is. This was typically coupled with all church members drawing on popular culture to reimagine what a shaman might be. Commenting on this, Mark (Church B) argued, 'the advantage of social media is it gives so many different views of shamans, and this showed us that we could pick and mix different ideas to be what we wanted'. Intriguingly, and for all participants eagerly seeking a shamanic identity, none had received any training from an indigenous or plastic shaman, as my conversation with Ian (Church B) explains:

Author: You keep mentioning shamans. Can I ask why you didn't train with one?

Ian: This is a difficult question brother. And there are several answers. I knew that it is possible to apprentice under one. But too expensive and too much work. [Pause]. Mmm, especially as I'd need to go to South America, for a year or more. [Pause]. The bigger problem was that shamans were too exotic for me. [Pause]. What I wanted was a version of shamanism that I was comfortable with. If I was going to commit to this church for the long term, I needed to make something suit me. Don't get me wrong, I'm here to change. But relative to what I want. I don't want anyone else telling me how I should be and giving me some alien system.

Author: In what way do you think they'd have interfered?

Ian: They'd have put their spin on things. Like a priest. Come on. The reason for setting up this church was to escape all of that. Ayahuasca makes us very susceptible to other views and I'd be at risk. My soul would be on the line. Not worth it man, not worth it.

Author: Ok, I think I'm starting to see what you mean. But. [Pause]. Isn't there a danger of that here? I mean, you have other group members here.

Ian: That is true and also very different. Here, there is no clear hierarchy of power. There is no one leader. Even though we fight and disagree, decisions are made universally. We all get a say. A shaman is too powerful and from my experiences, they don't negotiate beliefs. We wanted a place to be shamans without the rigidity. They already have their churches, and we are just setting up. There is another point too.

Author: Another point? What is it?

Ian: My goal was to be fully receptive to Ayahuasca and learn from her directly to remake me. As Ayahuasca makes people shamans, all I needed to do was spend enough time drinking ayahuasca. She'd teach me.

While it certainly seemed that the participants were seeking to ease their financial and temporal burden from not travelling to South America, it was also clear that the participants had explicitly rejected shamans as their teachers in order to sidestep receiving unfavourable sense. Fundamentally, the participants were keen to achieve freedom in how they imagined and constructed this religious view of self, outside of the gaze of (in)authentic practitioners already claiming this powerful notion of self. Broadly speaking, it is worth noting that individuals successfully claiming supernatural roles are often able to exert intense religious pressure to reshape how individuals view reality, which is an acute issue when sense is validated by a deity (Purchase et al., 2018). Curiously, though, and for all the participant concerns about the power of shamans, it is interesting to note that they turned to an even more powerful entity in the form of the goddess Ayahuasca to aid their shamanic self-making. By placing their faith in this psychoactive deity, the participants showed great confidence that Ayahuasca would grant them the identities they so eagerly sought, and not malevolently manipulate them. Addressing why the participants had believed Ayahuasca would benevolently aid them in their otherworldly identity work, Vincent (Church A) said: 'It is all over the internet man that Ayahuasca teaches people. She is the only teacher you need to become a shaman. She is perfect, and therefore safe'. Reflecting on my time as an ayahuasca tourist, I can confirm that this had been a growing theme, with tourists often imagining a rapid and low-cost route to becoming an authentic shaman. However, and as well shall see throughout the rest of this chapter, adopting Ayahuasca as a teacher hardly mitigated powerful sense in relation to what a shaman can or should be.

While claiming a new version of self is not necessarily a straightforward act, generating plausibility can be even more challenging, as new behaviours, discourses and ways of thinking have to be negotiated by the individual and wider social group. Commenting on how his fellow church members had undertaken this task, and attempted to match personal/group desires against cultural expectations of a shaman, Felix (Church A) argued:

> Let me be clear here. I can never be indigenous. Anyone who sees me knows I was not born in South America. I have an English accent, am English and I can hardly pass myself off. Could you imagine if

> we told people outside of here that we are shamans. They'd look at us very strangely. Y'see, the problem is that everyone has got it in their head that only tribal folks are shamans. I don't need to be indigenous though. Mmm, we thought about this for a long time. If Ayahuasca is what makes someone a shaman, then there is no problem. All we needed here was the support of Ayahuasca. Indigenous shamans might not support us calling ourselves shamans. I read online that they hate Westerners calling themselves shamans. Best we don't meet them or interact with them. I don't want anyone casting a spell on me. And meeting them might make us feel insecure. This is why its best that me being a shaman happens here.

Perhaps perceived inauthenticity on the part of the participants was a further reason they rejected training with authentic shamans. Turning our attention to the participant fears of being unable to meet wider cultural stereotypes of being a shaman outside of their churches, we see the shaman identity embedded within a knot of tensions. As such, and in an attempt to avoid being othered by wider society, shamanic self-making was only undertaken inside these churches. When we consider how the participants had frequently criticised non-church members, it is also possible to view this pejorative stance as an identity defence mechanism, undermining the right of any outsider and detractor to speak about this sacrosanct view of self.

In order to better understand the otherworldly nature of shamanic self-making, the following section explores the participant desires for real magic.

7.1.3. The Magical Nature of Being

Fundamental to the participants pursuing ayahuasca and a shamanic identity, was the potential to transcend the mundane limitations of being and embed themselves within magical cosmologies. As we will now see, this was not an abstract desire but rather a commitment to utilising magical practices as part of transforming themselves and the world around them. Within itself, expecting ayahuasca to create

magical capabilities is not uncommon and is generally linked to beliefs that the human can exist in a 'perfect' otherworldly state of being. Commenting on this Seb (Church B) argued:

> Who doesn't want to be perfect, with a body capable of doing anything? What most people don't realise is that ayahuasca changes our core. She is a panacea and can cure everything. Whatever is wrong with us, ayahuasca can fix it. Seriously, look online and you'll see. There is loads of stuff about how ayahuasca has saved people from cancer, AIDS, you name it. It really cures everything. [Pause]. For a long time I'd believed in Western medicine and I was wrong. When I came to see that everything is spirit-based, it all made more sense. I'm just a spirit trapped in this body. Wearing it like a cloak, and one day it will drop off. Understanding my spirit nature helped me work towards healing myself. It is evil that causes physical ailments and nothing else. Anything that corrupts our soul hurts our body and reduces our magic. [Pause]. Everything has a spirit in it. So, when I speak, my spirit reverberates in my body and into the ether, influencing the spirit in objects. This is what I see in my visions. It all makes sense when you think about it. If everything has a spirit inside it, then I can change what an object is. Kind of like using a magnet with iron filings. [Pause]. I just need to learn how to do this and do real magic. My spirit moves my body now, and I will figure this out for how to move other things.

Within this ontological view, the human exists as a spirit-body duality, with the spirit only temporarily occupying the body, and metaphorically 'wearing… [the body] like a cloak' until the spirit is liberated in death. In this way, the spirit is a vital animating force, not only capable of moving matter, but being the true essence of the individual. These beliefs appear to be at the heart of participant magical thinking, (Curry, 1999; Zusne & Jones, 1989), and beliefs that thoughts and words can act as a spiritual force on the material world. Although the participants seemed unaware of Pre-Socratic philosophy, such claims are certainly reminiscent of Leucippus and Democritus, the original atomists, and their notion that all matter

contains spirit (Taylor, 2011). Looking at how the participants arrived at this process, was, as Seb (Church B) argued, a simple matter of watching his spirit reorientate matter in visions and hallucinations, rather than mentally building more complex systems of knowledge.

Through a magical lens, and guided by experiences from the ayahuasca state, we also come to see ayahuasca being positioned as a supernatural panacea and spectacular catalyst of self. Commenting on these aspects, Benny (Church A) said: 'From what I read online, illness comes from evil spirits. Then only a spirit medicine like Ayahuasca can heal me. I don't need any other medicine, only drink ayahuasca'. We thus come to see health and disease as a simple binary of good and evil, depicting an individual's spiritual and moral status. As such, and through devotion to Ayahuasca, these participants saw themselves as the arbiters of their own well-being, 'inoculating' themselves against demonic beings and disease through this otherworldly brew. Yet, and for such lofty goals we may well ask whether the participants had achieved perfect health or were capable of performing magic, and if not, how they accounted for it? Reflecting on my time in these churches, I witnessed nothing miraculous, contravening the materialist laws of this universe, or that suggested the participants had stopped illness or ageing. This being the case, we will now examine how the participants managed to maintain magical sense-making models in contradiction to what might be viewed as objective reality. Discussing this, Mary (Church C) argued:

> I'd always wanted to believe in magic, and in a little way I had. I'd never seen it as possible outside my dreams. Drinking ayahuasca, mmm, showed me that anything is possible. The more time I spent here the more I thought about who I am and what I am. Long gone are the days of me thinking that I'm just some ordinary human. I'm far more than that and ayahuasca has helped so much with this. Mmm, whenever I drink [aya]huasca I see my true self, my magical self. Over time I've learnt how to manoeuvre my way through the ayahuasca lands. In the beginning, ayahuasca visions happened to me, and over time I became better at doing stuff there. Casting spells, communicating and having a life there. So why couldn't I become a

> real priestess? Casting spells? Ayahuasca showed me I could. Mmm, but I have had some difficulties here and still do. [Pause]. How should I say this? Well, mmm, I've never seen anybody do real magic yet, at least when not outside of an ayahuasca session. Mmm, we've all done magic during ayahuasca, including exorcisms and I've watched people teleport and make things levitate [referring to hallucinations]. I needed to change me though, to become a genuine spiritual woman capable of the deepest magic. Only changing myself and ridding myself of evil would do this. I had to change my substance within. Do you know that our souls can become contaminated with evil? Possessed by evil spirits who suck our life force away from our souls. I saw it in a vision. I needed to purify myself and ayahuasca was the way to do all of this. [Pause]. I did get sick last week, blinding headaches. We all put it down to my interacting with the outside world too much. Anyone who is seriously ill must have done something bad to deserve it. And until I work on this stuff I can never achieve what I want in this world.

Critically, and while all participants claimed to have carried out magic within hallucinations and visions, none felt able to say this about their mundane day-to-day life. While failures to achieve magic in waking life had the potential to undermine emerging magical sense-making models, alongside preferred shamanic versions of self, the participants were eager to background such concerns, typically through fideism as Mary (Church C) just stated. Yet, it was abundantly clear that the participants were philosophically proactive in their sense-making, where possible, often stepping beyond the need for greater faith, and offering guidance over how to achieve demonstrable magic, through removing evil from their lives. In this way, and for the participants, it seems that evil can negatively impact on the potential to operationalise magical capabilities. While such sense appeared to satisfy many of the participants about their lack of magic, we must not imagine that there were not underlying tensions, as Shelley (Church C) said:

> At the end of the day, I can wait and am happy to do so. But this is like an itch that won't go away. Ultimately, either I get what I want,

> or I don't. Bad enough if everyone gets it but me. What if nobody gets it? What if nobody ever does real magic? And what if a good person gets sick? Or dies? Not easy to explain that is it? Not sure what we'd do in a decade if this is still the case. Don't get me wrong. We have done so much here that is astonishing. But this is a make or break. And it has to happen.

Herein lies the challenge of religions that support observable supernatural acts in this universe, either they are demonstrable, or they are not. For these participants, it seems that there is a genuine expectation that shamanic desires should be fulfilled in the near future, with these new religions being exposed to acute doubt should this fail to happen. With the future being a key element of sense- and self-making, the following section examines how the participants made sense of themselves within the tale of the universe.

7.1.4. The Teleological Journey of Mankind

Broadly speaking, religious life tends to be teleological in nature, depicting how individuals position themselves in a cosmic journey, working towards achieving a meaningful life in this world or the next (Aristotle, 2008). Within these three churches, it was clear that the participants were engaged in teleological sense-making, telling themselves preferred cosmological stories about their futures. Importantly though, and as we shall see in this section, while teleological sense-making predominantly focused on the fate of these church members, it also provided more general information on humanity. Helping us start to understand teleological sense-making, Ray (Church C) said:

> Before ayahuasca I only had a loose idea of my life. I guess everyone does in a way. I hadn't really thought about the ultimate direction and exactly what I'd do and where I'd end up. Beyond getting a job and all that. I'd thought a bit about the afterlife and liked the idea. Why wouldn't I? Who wouldn't want eternal life? Unless you go to Hell. The problem is that living a humdrum life, there isn't the time

> to think properly about any of this. And most people really don't. Ah, but here, we had a lot of time to think and talk. The idea of life being just here and now seemed kind of dumb and fake. Our visions showed us that there were other worlds, and Ayahuasca told us that'd we'd live forever. Ok, so yeah, the promise of eternal life was there. But we didn't know anything else really and we really needed to. Otherwise, we might spend an eternity being punished. None of us wanted that.

These comments suggest that prior to joining these churches, that teleological sense-making had been limited and predominantly occurred at a pre-theorised level, related to simple thoughts about the future. As such, drinking ayahuasca had raised critical questions about life, being in the world, and whether physical death leads to the annihilation of self. We thus see the participants looking beyond the mortal stage of life, and looking at themselves as key players within a cosmic tapestry of personal salvation, facilitated through visions and hallucinations, as Steph (Church B) argued:

> The more we saw of our futures in ayahuasca the more it worried and excited us. The way towards a brighter future beyond death was being presented, but it wasn't always clear how to achieve it. [Pause]. Well. Hmm. Talking about it after the ceremonies we wanted to figure it all out. Umm, this was one of the most important things for us. We didn't want to wreck our futures. [Pause]. Fortunately, we also had Ayahuasca guiding us, and telling us what to do. Like all things though, she would speak to one of us, and then we'd all talk about it later to see what it was as that should be. Even though we all follow Ayahuasca, we need to get this stuff right. Can't afford no mistakes in what we say. [Pause]. Getting agreement is never easy though, as we all have very different experiences at times. And sometimes people just want their way, irrespective of what Ayahuasca says.

Problematically, the challenge for each participant, and churches, was which salvific story to tell? Not surprisingly, this was a thorny issue, as with all of eternity at stake, sense-making mistakes were viewed as potentially creating everlasting consequences. Due to the seriousness of this issue, and akin to much of the sense-making we have seen in this study, the participants again turned to Ayahuasca, seeking her guidance. Tactically, this approach seemed to reduce the participant tensions about what sense they made, apportioning the responsibility for their souls to Ayahuasca as a divine being. We might wonder though, what a future with Ayahuasca might lead to, beyond this mortal life. Commenting on this Craig (Church A) said:

> We all had a lot of ideas about what the future was and could be for us. Thing was we were very much aware of the risks of getting it wrong. The question was how to do the right thing and get the best deal for our souls. Ok, so we had already done a lot. Binned the evil of the world. Didn't lie, cheat or steal or any of that stuff. Gotten rid of bad relationships. We knew that we needed to keep ourselves spiritually pure. Like avoid evil spirits and demons and all that. Makes sense doesn't it. If we are infected, we don't go to Heaven. Or the ayahuasca version of it. [Pause]. And we were following Ayahuasca's advice in our visions. [Pause]. But what would it mean for us to go to Heaven? This wasn't easy to answer at first. But the more we looked, the more we saw in our visions that it would be a return to innocence. Y'know, the old ways. Forgotten knowledge. Forbidden knowledge. With Ayahuasca as our guide and our growing commitment to the truth of magic, we realised that we could reach a state of enlightenment. Why not? Ayahuasca is the gateway to human consciousness. There is loads on the internet about this. We loved this and saw this as part of our destiny. And if you think about it, we'd be superhuman. I was talking with the group about this last week, and we came to see that we'd be like Adam and Eve again before the fall [reference to Genesis in the Bible]. With all proper human capabilities restored. See how Ayahuasca gives amazing gifts?

The notion of returning to a pre-fallen state akin to Adam and Eve was common throughout these churches, suggesting that an ayahuasca-based Heaven would allow the participants to exist in a natural, enlightened and unspoiled state. Examining this aspect, it often seemed that the participants were drawing on a limited number of extant religious stories to scaffold new sense, which might explain why the Bible was so frequently used to make sense of themselves. Having said this, there was little to suggest that the participants could meaningfully discuss what their lives would be like in the afterlife, or how they would even die, on the basis that drinking ayahuasca would supposedly protect them from ill health. Within itself though, and even within long established religions, metaphysical incoherence is common, and solutions rarely provided by congregations and priests due to the complexity of systematising otherworldly knowledge with mundane life.

Finally, and while arguments have been made that we might consider ayahuasca akin to the Biblical forbidden fruit, the participants never described ayahuasca as a source of corruption, but rather the ultimate means to achieve 'perfection'. Problematically though, and as we might imagine, achieving perfection and working towards eternal Heavenly life were not easy tasks, particularly with embodied life being in a corrupt universe.

7.1.5. Failures to Make Self

While this chapter has so far looked at participant attempts to remake themselves as part of the ayahuasca sense-making process, my attention now turns to individuals who left these churches as a consequence of failing to make sense and self. Problematically though, and as we will see, rejecting the divine nature of ayahuasca, and her salvific role led these religious dissenters to abandon this new faith and re-embracing their former lives. With such participants having left these churches at the time of this study, and the participants being unwilling to contact these individuals, all sense- and self-making failures were detailed by current church members. While this might be considered a biased process, as the participants were overtly prejudiced against their former members, it is worth noting that we can still gleam key insights about how the participants viewed

difficulties in maintaining faith. Furthermore, and with some caution, we can, to some degree, draw out a deeper understanding of sense- and self-making failures. To help us do this, we can look at my conversation with Carly (Church B):

> Author: I hope you don't mind me asking, but you keep mentioning some members who left?
> Carly: Yes, I do. And I've been wanting to talk to you for ages about this. I know you aren't really one of us. Mmm, you seem to be ok though, and what happened at the beginning of our church was horrible. Nobody speaks about it now. Or if they do, it is only to condemn those who left.
> Author: If there is anything you want to discuss; this is what I'm here for.
> Author: Well, there are sixteen of us here now. Mmm, yes that's right. It was more at one point though, and over the years we lost three members. And I mean proper members. They were here, took part and everything. They didn't just come for a week and run away. Nothing like that. Umm, I really thought they were my family but I guess not. [Sighs]. All-in-all, I think they lasted between six months to a year and left after much conflict. When we were setting all this up, we were all in a bit of a state, but we started to work out what was going on and did this together. Ah. They didn't though. They were struggling with the impact of ayahuasca and were always sick. We thought it was 'cos they were sensitive to all this. The bad feeling grew though as they never got better, and we knew there was something wrong with them. I mean, they were healthy in a way. Mmm, but they were too sick when taking ayahuasca, and they didn't agree with what we thought. It shocked us when we heard that they were forming their views separate to us, and this was. This was heresy! [Exclaims]. We couldn't allow it.
> Author: It sounds like this was a very difficult time for you all. Let us start at the beginning. You said that they were always sick from ayahuasca? And that they had their own views about ayahuasca? Different to yours?

> Carly: Absolutely! Anyone being that sick must have evil in them and a lot. [Pause]. Oddly, I'm not surprised they didn't believe what we did. If you were always sick you would get the wrong idea. It was their fault though for refusing to embrace the goodness and ayahuasca, and not ridding themselves of their wickedness.

Reminding ourselves that these churches openly espoused the belief that ill health is a consequence of internal malevolence and a lack of purity, we should not be surprised that they responded badly to any member continuing to struggle with sickness during ayahuasca ceremonies. These are of course blunt health-based models enmeshed within religious fervour that ayahuasca consumption should eradicate all ailments and negative experiences. Discussing these aspects, Elijah (Church B) said:

> Anyone showing signs of frequent sickness would be suspected as evil. It really is that simple. And we became very suspicious of the three in our group who never got better with ayahuasca. As time progressed, we kept asking to purify them. They didn't like it, and a split in our church happened. We noticed that they were spending more time together away from us and sitting together during ceremonies. It was a group within our group if that makes sense? Then one day it really kicked off. After a ceremony, I'd said that it was time for them to remove their evil and that would stop them being sick. We couldn't believe what happened. They said that ayahuasca was just a drug, and that our visions were just chemical reactions. It all made sense to us. We were right that they had somehow been corrupted. This was the end of our time together, as we couldn't let this infection spread through here. This view of theirs that the world is only physical is a disease. A very dangerous disease. And we excised it immediately. [Pause]. It has left us very wary about people and how deceptive evil can be. Ah, but then, we were less knowledgeable back then, and we couldn't speak to Ayahuasca as easily. Today, Ayahuasca protects us much more, and I really think we'd spot evil much easier now.

When we consider that drinking ayahuasca is a known source of physical and psychological distress (Shanon, 2010), failing to adapt to this practice was thus an invitation to be stigmatised within these churches. Problematically, and seeing individuals displaying signs of sickness, the three churches purged their 'infected' members, metaphorically and literally 'excising' this congregational evil. This act revealed that there were acute fears within these churches about 'catching' evil from unchecked sense, like an airborne disease that could spread amongst the congregations. While sickness was a predicating factor in these church upheavals, this was compounded by claims that these infected church members had claimed ayahuasca was a drug, and that hallucinations and visions were nothing more than pharmacologically induced sensory disturbances. Within itself, this argument struck at the heart of these churches, risking more magical beliefs, and threatening to immerse these congregations with materialism, an epistemological stance considered anathema to otherworldly thinking. This being said, this schism of sense greatly impacted on participant well-being, leaving an ongoing concern about their ability to weave real magic and transform themselves into shamans, as discussed in previous sections, and as now mentioned by Joe (Church C):

> This was a great shock to us all and left us terrified that we might not become real shamans, and never do proper magic. It was an icy stab in the heart of us all. [Pause]. Before my former friend left, we spoke privately, as I really wanted to save her soul. She told me that she no longer believed ayahuasca was a force for good. I think she was afraid of ayahuasca, and her visions were traumatic. I don't think she could understand what she was seeing, and was being battered by horrific images, which made her sicker. Sadly, she couldn't understand that this was the case as a result of her refusal to renounce her wickedness. It broke my heart when she left, but she had to go. She just couldn't see herself walking a difficult path towards the divine. [Pause]. I'd say this was one of the greatest challenges we've ever faced here. And yeah, we screen people more now. Like you [referencing the author]. Do you know what it felt like when they said that we were doing drugs? If any of us here had

> believed it, we'd have lost everything, and ourselves. Let me tell you, and no matter what anyone says here, it led to many dark nights of the soul. Facing this crisis, we pulled together, and forbade anyone to mention them. We can't have their evil seeping back in. Problem is though that we are still a bit nervous about when we'll get our magic powers and live the lives we want. Until then we'll always be exposed to doubts and confusion.

We thus see the participants raising the failure to process visionary non-sense into sense as being a key factor in these difficulties, but with non-sense being positioned as a result of embodied evil. Speaking to the participants privately about this issue, it seemed that they were split between a range of emotions about these events. For example, there was a general sense of sorrow, in that their former members would suffer an afterlife in what was tantamount to a Christian Hell, while being revulsed that evil had penetrated their churches. Finally, there was an underlying current of fear that their beliefs in Ayahuasca were misplaced. Importantly, and with the participants placing much stock in sensory validation, it is likely that the only thing to resolve their fears about the ontological status of ayahuasca, and themselves as magical practitioners, is to demonstrably achieve these aspects. Failing this, to rewrite their sense-making models to account for this otherworldly inability.

7.2. Summary

Throughout this chapter, we have seen the importance of otherworldly self-making within the greater arena of ayahuasca sense-making. Critically, and while making sense was often carried out at all levels of consciousness in order to process hallucinatory and visionary non-sense, self-making was predominantly a conscious act. The questions for making self were not limited to, who do I want and not want to be?, but also tested the limits of self-making, focusing on who can I be? In attempting to explore the limits of being human required the participants to consider what it is to be human in this universe, drawing on pre-theorised notions of self, and reality, while re-imagining what they might be. Not surprisingly, assessing self is not a simple task, exposing gaps of knowledge, with understanding typically

being filled from preferred cultural resources, often in line with desires to be a perfect magical being. Importantly, a shamanic identity seemed 'best' suited to this otherworldly task, viewed by all participants as the ultimate arbiter of magico-spiritual knowledge, and magical capabilities (Kehoe, 2000). Problematically though, and while the participants argued that transforming themselves was an arduous ongoing task of self-purification and devotion to the Goddess Ayahuasca, it was clear that they sought demonstrable capabilities in their use of magic. Within itself, it seems likely that a future failure amongst these participants to achieve their otherworldly goals would severely undermine the accepted spiritual ethnometaphysics at work in these churches. This is an acute issue when we consider that former group members had left due to an inability to make and maintain spiritual sense, and instead, re-embraced materialism while openly rejecting church magical thinking and supernatural sense-making. Broadly speaking, materialism and society itself were typically regarded as erosive to church members, with much effort to distance themselves from outsider evil, leading to each church functioning as an intense sense-making arena. As we saw though, the goddess Ayahuasca was at the heart of this endeavour and was frequently argued as giving divine sense for those willing to follow her advice within visions and hallucinations. Finally, there was certainly an element of transactionalism and utilitarianism in participant self-making, particularly as rejecting the evils of the world was believed to offer perfect health, magic, and a safe passage into a heavenly afterlife for those willing to embrace this ayahuasca-based faith.

Chapter 8: Discussion and Conclusions

8.1. Introduction

While the past several chapters have detailed the rationale for this study, overviewed the extant literature, and explicated the methodology and findings, this chapter pulls together all of these aspects to answer the research question, while highlighting the research gaps that have been filled. As we will see, there are four main areas of importance including (1) how the participants formed a new religion, (2) engaged with non-sense, (3) made sense of the non-sensical, and (4) undertook self-making. This is of course against the backdrop of the participants negotiating visions and hallucinations while attempting to mitigate their embodied tensions and psychological distress via sense- and self-making. Critically, all of these aspects provide the foundations of the discussion and conclusions in this chapter, while also allowing recommendations to be made for the participants with regards to their psychoactive sense- and self-making. Building on the conclusions, I also address my personal reflexions from functioning as the ethnographer, and finally, detail potential study limitations and future work to address methodological shortfalls. As a starting point, and to help provide clarity for the conclusions, the next section summarises the purpose of this study.

8.2. The Reason for Carrying out this Study

Undertaking this ethnography allowed a deeper understanding of how sense is made of ayahuasca non-sense within three emerging UK-based psychoactive churches. Fundamental to this process was explicating how ayahuasca drives complex ethnometaphysical negotiations about (1) what it is to be human, and (2) what sort of universe we believe we live in. Having spent over a decade interacting with several ayahuasca churches before this study, I was well aware of these issues, alongside the acute sense- and self-making challenges that can arise from drinking this potent brew. Furthermore, and just as importantly, how individuals from industrialised nations tend to struggle in re-establishing themselves in a less than

mundane cosmos (Charlton, 2007). With ayahuasca increasingly being viewed as a sense- and self-making catalyst, it was chosen in this study as a psychoactive lens to explore the nether regions of mind and embodied processes of making sense of non-sense. Broadly speaking, and while it seems fair to say that everyday life is full of non-sense, it is usually at a low-level, and not particularly visible to the individual experiencing it, or the researcher trying to examine it (Dibitonto, 2014). Working with ayahuasca communities however, created an opportunity to interrogate overwhelming non-sensical experiences, particularly through cosmology episodes, which are almost impossible to predict outside of ayahuasca ceremonies (Orton & O'Grady, 2016). In so doing, this study has worked to address a historic shortfall of information about intense sense- and self-making, as an individualistic and social endeavour. Furthermore, and considering that industrialised nations tend to denigrate the otherworldly (Gowdy et al., 2013), this study created an opportunity to explore church participants as ethnometaphysical bricoleurs, negotiating a variety of extant ontologies and epistemologies as part of making sense and self towards a religious view of the universe. Helping us address the several aspects mentioned so far, the following research question was asked:

How is sense made of ayahuasca non-sense?

In order to answer this research question, I drew on my etic understanding of the extant literature, and emic sensitisation to several ayahuasca communities in the UK and beyond (Kottak, 2006), thus allowing the research aim to be constructed:

To better understand how sense is made of non-sense within UK-based ayahuasca churches.

As part of this aim, four main research objectives were identified, including:

1. *To understand the formation of ayahuasca churches and their motivations;*
2. *To elucidate what constitutes ayahuasca non-sense;*
3. *To draw out how sense is made of ayahuasca non-sense; and*
4. *To understand how individuals make sense of themselves within their churches.*

8.3. Discussion: Main Findings

Having overviewed the salient background literature, motivations, and methodology in previous chapters, the key findings will now be drawn out to highlight what contributions have been to our understanding.

8.3.1. Forming a New Religion

We are currently within a time where pervasive religions are losing their hegemonic power over the collective Western mind (Partridge, 2005), which has left an ethnometaphysical void to be filled as traditional priests struggle to give sense over what reality is, while validating themselves as the route to knowledge (Brown, 2009). Within this tumultuous otherworldly arena, it is increasingly clear that intense religious innovation is being undertaken, particularly towards communicating with the divine, and developing more personalised beliefs, practices and doctrines. Looking at the participants in this study, it was apparent that they were highly motivated towards constructing new ayahuasca religions and churches better suited to their otherworldly desires, alongside mitigating mundane problems associated with the time and costs from undertaking ongoing ayahuasca tourism. Yet, and as we saw, constructing a new religion is no small task, simultaneously presenting many practical and otherworldly opportunities while raising many challenges. For example, it was apparent that the participants had keenly drawn on the experiences of their members who had been ayahuasca tourists, and as such, picked venues capable of positively supporting the ayahuasca state, i.e., without heavy traffic or external noises which could negatively perturb visions and hallucinations (Shanon, 2010). More troublesome, however, was the challenge facing the participants to develop ‘fit-for-purpose’ beliefs, practices and doctrines capable of supporting preferred sense- and self-making. Having said this, the participants were rarely without sense- and self-making capabilities and resources, as they frequently utilised cultural concepts, and personal experiences, such as having been raised as cultural Christians (Bialecki, Haynes & Robbins, 2008; Moffat & Yoo, 2019).

When we consider the intense physical, psychological and ethnometaphysical traumas individuals face consuming ayahuasca (Boyer & Shannon, 2005), the social environment is a key part of mediating this experience. This is based on the notion that the pharmacological effect of ayahuasca is in part influenced by the people and places surrounding the individual consuming it (Labate et al., 2010). For those drinking this brew in the UK, this can be particularly troublesome, as social attitudes typically condemn the use of psychoactives (Prayag, 2015; Siff, 2015; Tupper, 2008). As such, we can see why these participants created churches capable of functioning as sense- and self-making 'safe spaces', away from contradictory models of being (Poll & Smith, 2003). On this basis, we should not be surprised that the participants showed an ongoing concern about whether outsiders might contaminate their churches with real evil alongside conflicting sense. At the heart of this issue was the view that only the sacred brew ayahuasca protects against the demonic, acting as a spiritual 'vaccine' against nefarious otherworldly beings and their malevolent actions.

8.3.2. Engaging with Non-Sense

While it was apparent that the participants had encountered non-sense as part of their daily lives prior to consuming ayahuasca, few had experienced immersive or overwhelming non-sense. As such, there was little to suggest that the participants were well prepared or had adequate resilience strategies to process non-sense into more meaningful sense. Ruminating on this issue, a few fundamental questions must be asked, including (1) what do we mean by making sense? (2) How do we make sense? (3) What, if any, are the limits of sense-making? And (4) what happens when we fail to make sense? (Dibitonto, 2014). Exploring these aspects, it is clear that as conscious adults, we all have an experience of the world, lived and imagined. Having said this, and as we cannot know all things, some parts of life must always remain outside of our understanding, particularly when we encounter something new, or experience what we know in a different context.

Overviewing participant experiences, all had a conceptual understanding of the non-sensical elements of life, typically coupled with basic strategies for dealing

with the unknown. The simplest tactic, for example, was not to initiate meaningful sense-making, and to leave non-sense as non-sense, providing there was no perceived loss from doing so, and incomplete sense-making was a viable social option. Of course, it stands to reason that this approach requires at least rudimentary sense-making to have taken place, allowing at least a simple understanding, so that a decision can be made whether to try to make more sense or leave something as a vaguely known but non-sensical phenomenon. Broadly speaking, and with this sample consisting of conscious adults, there was little to suggest that non-sense had been a critical issue prior to consuming ayahuasca, unless, of course, a tragedy had occurred, and they were left struggling to make sense of it. Listening to the participants speak about everyday non-sense, it seemed that the commonality of being in the world had led to a myriad of accessible cultural resources to partially understand the 'unexplainable', or alternatively, to just accept the unknown as a part of life.

In comparison to daily non-sense, ayahuasca visions and hallucinations were brimming within non-sense (Shanon, 2010), challenging the extent to which the senses can be trusted, and what is really real. Not surprisingly, the ontological and metaphysical lens used to make sense of the world heavily dictates how we address this aspect, where for example, a materialist will tend to dismiss ayahuasca experiences as perceptual false distortions of reality (Weil & Rosen, 1993), and the spiritually inclined may consider visions and hallucinations as what is really real (Siegel & West, 1975). For the participants in this study, all of whom were embedded within the latter view, ayahuasca becomes an epistemological lens to lift the mundane cloak shrouding reality, and reveal hidden supernatural phenomena. As we might expect, embracing the otherworldly is not a simple task, particularly for those who have been immersed in cultures that openly dismiss the otherworldly and stigmatises individuals taking this view (Charlton, 2007).

While we are relatively free to make sense as best we can (Weick, 1995), we must not imagine that our sense-making sits entirely outside of scrutiny, as sense-making is constrained by the resources we have access to, alongside personal preferences, notions of plausibility, and our wider social groups (Essers & Benschop, 2007; Watson, 2008). This can be an acute issue in novel situations, where innovative

sense-making is required, and there is little guarantee that sense-making will be successful or accepted (Purchase et al., 2018). Overviewing the participant experiences of intense non-sense, it was clear that ayahuasca undermined extant norms and certainties about life, including themselves and what it means to live in the world. These sense-making cues frequently highlighted explicit tensions over what is really real, whether magic is achievable, and if ayahuasca is better considered a drug or deity? (Dobkin de Rios 1994; Nichols 2004; Osmond 1957; Ruck et al., 1979). While some church members claimed to have considered these questions as part of their former ayahuasca tourism, it was generally argued that they had received relatively little attention due to tourism being sporadic, in comparison to the ongoing nature of these church ceremonies. Problematically though, being immersed in continuous church-based non-sense seemed to quickly erode certainty in their extant sense-making models, triggering existential terrors and cosmology episodes, as the participants lost their sense of self, and felt trapped in an increasingly unknowable universe (Weick, 1993). By addressing these aspects, this study has moved our understanding of cosmological sense-making and cosmology episodes beyond negative aspects that just befall us as in the case of natural disasters (Muhren, Van Den Eede & Van de Walle, 200), and opened a new lens to explore overt non-sense and chaos.

8.3.3. Making Sense of the Non-Sensical

Having detailed the challenges emerging from non-sensical hallucinatory and visionary experiences, I will now overview how the participants made sense of non-sense, or not, as the case may be. With pervasive common sense outside of these churches tending to position ayahuasca as an illicit and immoral act, and as previously mentioned, all participants frequently expressed an acute need to barrier themselves from conflicting sense-making models. Intriguingly, this approach has much similarity to ayahuasca tourism, where those concerned about being othered will seek to avoid the gaze of condemnatory social groups. Building on this notion, we come to see that these churches were clearly geared to facilitating innovative sense- and self-making, iteratively using ayahuasca as a means to discover the ‘truth’ of the universe and themselves. Practically, therefore, these churches functioned as

hallowed salvific sense- and self-making spaces, outside of the corruption and malevolence of daily life. This concept of sense- and self-making being mediated through good and evil external forces is certainly reminiscent of Manicheism, and common-sense interpretations of Christianity, where our cognitive processes can be subverted by the malevolent or enhanced through the divine (Webster, Tanner & Torrance, 2010).

It seems that backgrounding their former lives outside of these churches was the first step towards developing resilience to cosmology episodes and starting to create a coherent common sense within these congregations. Taking the preferred sense-making stance that the supernatural is real, and thus rejecting any claim of being drug users engaged in fake sensory experiences (Prayag, 2015; Siff, 2015; Tupper, 2008), the participants were able to collectively work together to make sense of non-sense. This is not to suggest that this was an easy task, but that removing personal doubt about the validity of their supernatural experiences allowed a greater openness to innovative sense-making. A key part of this process was in the participants shifting the responsibility of what sense was made away from themselves to following the divine sense-based advice from the goddess Ayahuasca. Within such worldviews, spirit communicators are particularly efficacious for empowering individuals to make new sense outside or previous models of understanding (Bassett, 2012; Delaney & Hastie, 2007). Broadly speaking, and within ayahuasca tourism, it is not uncommon to see ayahuasca depicted as a conscious, immaterial actor, functioning as a spirit guide or goddess. Embedding themselves within what might be considered fideism, the participants were thus able to present almost any sense-making challenge to Ayahuasca, and expect a 'solution' or failing that, have more faith that an answer would be revealed eventually. Of course, this is not to suggest that the participants removed their agency in the sense-making process, but rather that Ayahuasca's sense held a greater epistemological weight for truth than any sense a participant could claim to personally make. Importantly, the ability to see and hear ayahuasca in visions and hallucinations, appeared to satisfice participant desires for sensory validation of religious experiences, and was something argued as lacking in their former religions.

When we consider the turbulent nature of ayahuasca sense-making, and how sickness, purging, and emotional responses are commonplace (Wilson, 2015), it is

worth noting that these intense embodied experiences can start to dissipate as people acclimatise to the effects of this otherworldly brew. Critically though, the participants claimed that their ability to physically and psychologically cope with ayahuasca, as well as make sense of their experiences, was a consequence of removing internalised evil, i.e., making a purified self to make holier sense. In this way we see evil being argued as down-regulating cognitive processes, and impairing the divine spark within each human, with the sense-making solution being the spiritual medicine ayahuasca. More broadly, we might view the greater ability to make sense as being due to a greater familiarisation with these hallucinatory and visionary alien landscapes. Not surprisingly, and as personal and social tensions reduced, the participants were able to focus on systematising reality as a supernatural endeavour, with Ayahuasca functioning as an unchallengeable epistemological agent, and each church claiming to have access to the 'one true religion'. Finally, and as is so often the case with religious sense-making, all other systems of knowledge and belief were stigmatised, with much effort made to annihilate opposing sense i.e., heresy.

8.3.4. Self-Making

The extent to which we can re-make ourselves remains a hotly contested issue, particularly when our desires extend beyond the material laws of this universe. When we consider that ayahuasca presents fantastical and materially improbable/impossible notions of self, how we perceive ourselves after consuming this otherworldly brew easily challenges more mundane depictions of self. Having said this, identity is a means to tell a mythical story (Reimer & Dueck, 2012) as part of our teleological tale towards Heaven or Hell (Shanon, 2010). Throughout this study, it was apparent that the participants religiously sought to transcend common sense notions of material existence (Lindeman & Aarnio, 2007), and instead, like many ayahuasca tourists, re-imagine what it is to be human. Broadly speaking, however, it seems fair to say that the participants were poorly prepared to investigate what they could plausibly claim about themselves. This was not only a concern for the participants, but also for myself, as the ethnographer, raising the challenge of what epistemological and ontological lenses should be used to examine

how the participants claimed to change themselves. Critically, the purpose of this study was not to measure the extent to which the participants succeeded or failed in transforming their material bodies, but rather to examine who they wanted and did not want to be, while drawing out the discursive ethnometaphysical tactics used to position themselves as a certain type of being. In this way, this study sidestepped the challenge of trying to explicate whether any material change had occurred to the participants and used CDA to consider self-making.

Reflecting on the self-making that the participants undertook, it was abundantly clear that all individuals sought to become magico-spiritual practitioners, i.e., shamans. When we consider the popularity of this identity within ayahuasca communities, and how well it is known even in industrialised nations (Kehoe, 2000), we should not be surprised that the shaman was the identity of choice. Importantly, participant self-making was not just a means to rebrand themselves, but rather a way to become an entirely different form of human, unconstrained by material reality. This approach not only opened the door to unpick what the participants thought they could become, but how ayahuasca was a key part of this new way of being. Simply speaking, and addressing the latter element first, we should remember that ayahuasca visions and hallucinations frequently depict individuals as having souls/spirits, embedding humanity within a dualist view of existence (Shanon, 2010). Looking at this ontological view from a diffusion of innovation perspective (Rogers, 2003), we must not imagine that this view arose purely from the ayahuasca state, as similar to the desire for magic, this belief was driven by a mixture of concepts drawn on from popular cultural resources (Luhrmann et al., 2010) and participant experiences as ayahuasca tourists. Like with much of the sense-making in this study, we thus see a reciprocal flow of sense- and self-making based on multiple resources to allow the participants to work towards being their idealised notion of a human.

Within the central goal of self-making were several key participant desires, including being able to exist outside of ill health, as an enlightened being, and capable of working magical wonders achieved through thoughts and words (Curry, 1999; Zusne & Jones, 1989). Problematically though, these spectacular goals were a source of ongoing sense and self-making tensions, as while the participants had

placed sensory perception as one of the foundations of their epistemology, they were unable to demonstrate magic in everyday life. While recognising their lack of magical capabilities it was noticeable that shared common sense teleologies were rapidly being constructed to account for this challenge, typically arguing that only further purification of oneself, coupled with diligent service to ayahuasca, would allow real magic to occur in the future. Akin to more generalised sense-making, making self was thus an act requiring great faith, and where sensory validation was missing, more faith was needed. We might well view this as a self-supporting feedback loop, where contradictory sense was prohibited in these churches. Overviewing this tactic, it often seemed that the removal of dissenting opinions had been highly successful, typically achieved through the threat of espousing discursive heresies leading to eternal punishment. Not only was this aspect a form of strict sense- and self-making regulation, but a means to constrain what was considered a preferred church outcome, such as the route to personal salvation. Problematically though, it is worth noting that these churches claimed to have lost initial members over conflicts of sense, but more fundamentally the right to explore reality, suggesting potential future difficulties of growing these congregations, if sense- and self-making remains too heavily constrained. This is an acute issue when we remember that ayahuasca use is at best niche in the UK, and that those struggling to make supernatural sense may face condemnation in and outside of these churches (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Hogg & Terry, 2000). Consequently, new church members may face the unenviable challenge of trying to embed themselves within an organisation's 'common-sensical stock of knowledge' (Thurlow & Helms Mills, 2015, p. 247), while negotiating broader notions of social desirability (Bourguignon et al, 2006), as extant notions of sense and self are lost and remade (Hofstede, 2001; Ogbonna & Harris, 1998; Schein, 2004).

8.4. Conclusions

This study was carried out to create a better understanding of how embodied sense is made of non-sense, using the context of ayahuasca visions and hallucinations, which easily undermine extant models of being, and trigger existential terrors and cosmology episodes. Within itself, we know that acute traumas can reorientate

people towards taking increasingly spiritual views of themselves and reality (Pargament & Mahoney, 2002) as they seek to develop new life narratives to cope with distress (Bray, 2010). Considering the intense challenges facing these participants, it was not surprising that all these churches functioned as sense- and self-making safe spaces, relatively unhindered by potentially contradictory views. Yet, we must not imagine that these churches were in a social vacuum, entirely detached from the world, or that the participants had managed to dispense with their memories showing how otherworldly sense-makers are routinely stigmatised (Prayag, 2015; Siff, 2015; Tupper, 2008). Having said this, it was clear that social sense-making was a shared process, with no individual taking a permanent leadership role, thus transferring power horizontally amongst members, rather than from a higher ranked member to a less empowered individual (Purchase et al., 2018). Although, it must be noted that these churches were not lacking in power structures, as the goddess Ayahuasca was frequently positioned as the key communicator, the challenge for each participant was therefore, how to plausibly speak for her.

Considering that non-sense is at the heart of this study, we are left to ask a very important question: what is it that makes something non-sensical? This is not an easy question to answer, as while we can share common experiences of non-sense, it is also possible that what I find non-sensical, you might not. Within itself, and regarding non-sense, it was clear that the participants always had some understanding of an experience, even if at a simple level, perhaps showing nothing more than colours and shapes. As such, and even when bereft of sense, we are unlikely to sit outside of all perceptual understanding (Dibitonto, 2014). Troublingly though, if the best we can make is simple sense, it seems unlikely that this can be considered meaningful sense-making, as looking at a bizarre red object is unlikely to have us shouting "eureka!" just because we recognised the colour red. Instead, I argue that we must have a greater understanding, not only of the phenomenon itself, but in relation to the context of our experience. For example, I might see a cup of tea, thus, recognising the structure as a cup and liquid inside as tea, but, if for some reason, it is singing and dancing in front of me during a hallucination, non-sense will prevail. Unless however, this peculiar scene has a specific meaning to me. As such, it is possible to argue that non-sense results from (1) our inability to discern features from our sensory experiences, and (2)

adequately understand the context of what is happening. Importantly, and as we saw in this study, neither rationalism or truth are required to make sense (Weick, 1995), only that basic comprehension and meaning are satisficed relative to the individual, and their relevant social groups. Furthermore, that low levels of non-sense can potentially be tolerated, at least in the short term.

Importantly, should the level of non-sense rise, ayahuasca can easily overwhelm our sense-making capabilities, resulting in failed sense-making, leading to reality appearing discontinuous as we are left facing existential terrors and cosmology episodes. While a variety of attempts to process non-sense were made by these participants, the most efficacious strategy appeared to be the use of religion, achieved through personifying and deifying ayahuasca as an immaterial goddess, capable of giving sense to those seeking salvation (Shanon, 2010). Within this intensely religious view, the goddess Ayahuasca becomes a form of epistemological validation for sense- and self-making, capable of supporting all participant acts and beliefs, providing that a wider validation from the congregation can be achieved. Taking the view that the 'one true religion' had been discovered in each of these churches, reality could thus be split into a simple binary of good and evil, further reducing the cognitive burden from processing more complex non-sense into sense. Within this highly religious sense-making model, each new construction of self and the universe could function as an act of religious revelation, gifted to true devotees, not only beyond criticism, but functioning as a potential new church mandate. When we consider that only ayahuasca can provide truth in these churches, anyone claiming to speak on her behalf has the potential to be unchallengeable, provided it is socially desirable (Ivanova-Gongne, 2015).

Reminding ourselves that to make sense is to make self (Helms Mills, 2003; Helms Mills and Mills, 2009; Mills and Helms Mills, 2004), it was clear that the participants had sought to spectacularly transform themselves, often beyond what is commonly believed possible within the material universe. Problematically though, there was little to suggest that this sample had paid much attention to how they would achieve their self-making goals beyond consuming ayahuasca. As such, these individuals commonly struggled to maintain a coherent sense of self, as multiple notions of what one might be were negotiated. This issue seemed most

acute regarding the participant desires for supernatural powers, driven by pervasive beliefs commonly found in ayahuasca tourism (McKenna, Luna & Towers, 1995; Winkelman, 2001). Reflecting on this issue, it is worth noting that those experiencing altered states of consciousness as part of hallucinations and visions, seem particularly prone to seeking magical identities, beyond secular-materialist notions of reality (Powell, 2017; Taves, 2016).

Seeking to fundamentally transform themselves though, it was not surprising that the participants sought to claim a more empowered identity, which was that of a shaman, believed to be capable of engaging with spirits and carrying out real magic. Intriguingly though, and while a shamanic identity was preferred by all participants, none felt capable of claiming this version of themselves outside of these churches, fearing ridicule or allegations of cultural misappropriation (Kehoe, 2000). Within itself, the participant inability to properly actualise a shamanic self also echoed throughout their churches, most noticeably from being unable to perform real magic. While fideism was frequently used to account for an inability to manipulate the material world through magical thoughts and words, it was clear that the participants were trying to develop philosophical explanations for their religious beliefs. This was most noticeable for example, through the argument that since all matter contains a spiritual essence, that the shaman's spirit will eventually develop and move matter, thus creating a process for magic. As is often the case with increased philosophical religiosity, sense- and self-making can easily shift towards teleological thinking (Aristotle, 2008), with individuals speculating on what their futures might hold. Considering the prevalence of otherworldly self-making being carried out within this sample, it was not surprising that these individuals came to tell themselves teleological stories of a utopian afterlife. Importantly, and with eternal life being at stake, all speech, sense- and self-making was regulated, as a means to mitigate corrupting the soul, and to remove the danger of embracing a punishing afterlife in Hell. We might well wonder whether attempts to systematise reality and the human experience will continue along a philosophical path, or go back to faith, as was so common throughout this study.

While this section has so far concerned itself with the participants who managed to make new versions of themselves, it was apparent that this was not universally the

case, as acute sense- and self-making failures had led some members to leave these churches. While it was not possible to interact with these former members, it seems that these individuals had been stigmatised as unwilling to reject evil, due to struggling with their sense-making, alongside purging and showing other signs of sickness, all of which were proclaimed as marks of malevolence within these churches. When we consider that ayahuasca is a known source of embodied distress, frequently producing purging and sickness (Shanon, 2010), it raises a thorny question about how well these churches will manage to grow their membership, when common experiences are othered? (Martire et al, 2000). We know, for example, that individuals often struggle to make idealised notions of self, if such views are not welcomed (Monge & Contractor, 2003), which is unfortunate, as religions have much potential for producing environments conducive to positive sense- and self-making (Poll & Smith, 2003).

8.5. Recommendations for Participants

Having spent over a year observing and discussing the ongoing challenges faced by the participants in processing non-sense into coherent notions of sense and self, it was clear that they were seeking guidance on this issue. As such, this section takes a practical approach, ruminating on what, if anything, might efficaciously help these individuals, and future church members negotiate hallucinatory and visionary non-sense, while mitigating existential terrors, and backgrounding cosmology episodes. Helping explain the driver for this issue, Felix (Church A) said:

> Listen up buddy, we have all been talking, and we know you aren't a proper member here. Mmm, yeah, but, you have been here a while and you have seen a lot of what we do, and the problems we have. Plus, you've been to other churches, and we think this makes you a good guy to speak to about some of the problems we face each day. Umm, so, the chaos. You call it non-sense. We have too much in our visions and hallucinations. It is still crippling us at times. What should we do about it? Eh? And, while we are on about it, how do we get new church members? As you know, we've, we've had a lot

> of trouble in the past with guys coming here and getting scared of being labelled druggies [drug addicts]. And they always fall to pieces when drinking ayahuasca. What can we do about these things? [Pause]. You being here must be Ayahuasca's divine will, coming to help us. So, write it down for us in that book you are writing [this thesis]. We've let you come here, and now is the time to repay us.

Interestingly, and as Felix (Church A) highlighted, while I was never an authentic insider due to my failure to drink ayahuasca, I became enmeshed within these church teleologies, with speculation being common that I had been sent by the goddess Ayahuasca. Taking this approach, we see that the participants were able to sidestep their doctrines prohibiting non-sanctioned communications, and to reimagine a new role for myself, allowing for further doctrinal innovation. We might suspect, however, that whatever I might advise would go through intense sense-making scrutiny, possibly including the goddess Ayahuasca.

Addressing how new members might be encouraged to participate in or even join these churches is no small matter, particularly when we consider the social stigma regarding psychoactive consumption, and high levels of non-sense to be encountered. In comparison to established church members these are acute issues, as virgin members rarely have resilience to the social and cognitive challenges awaiting them should they consume this brew. Problematically, and rather obviously, should there be a failure to adequately address these aspects, it is likely that new members will reject further ayahuasca consumption, and these churches. This was certainly something I saw in my ayahuasca tourism, and heard was a common issue in these churches, at least during their formative stages. The difficulty, therefore, is how can new members survive stigma, and the overwhelming chaos arising from the loss of sense- and self-making models? As a starting point, we can remind ourselves that although frequently othered, and at present niche, ayahuasca consumption is a growing phenomenon in industrialised countries, particularly from those looking for more personalised ways to engage with the supernatural. Consequently, and with ayahuasca consumption being legal in the UK, as long as the psychoactive component DMT is not extracted, there are few potential barriers to marketing these churches, and seeking out members who

either have experience of ayahuasca, or other psychoactives, as well as individuals with a temperament for intense challenges. This tactic can allow a goodness of fit to be examined between potential new members and churches. Such an approach can allow a greater level of anonymity, and discussion about what it is like to take ayahuasca for both potential and current church members. Reflecting on my tourism, this was a common tactic by tourism providers who wanted an additional barrier to protect themselves from the 'wrong' tourist, i.e., an individual likely to be easily traumatised, or looking for a drug 'trip'. Again, and drawing on my ayahuasca tourism, this online process was often a prerequisite with several online discussions before an individual was accepted as a tourist.

When considering the pressures facing new ayahuasca sense- and self-makers it is worth noting that the churches themselves must play a more supportive role in facilitating a safe sense-making space. I argue this on the basis that all participants in this study stated that a supportive environment was key to making adequate sense and self. Yet, it might be difficult for these churches to accommodate diverging philosophical and religious views, particularly if new sense contradicts preferred views of the universe, and contradiction is viewed as a mark of evil. Problematically, this simple binary of good and evil discourses may hinder new members exploring who they are as part of negotiating what the universe is, and their place within it. Perhaps though, if these churches fear the wider contaminative effect of new member discourses, they might consider setting a time and place for freer explorations of sense- and self-making outside of everyday church life. Furthermore, and highlighting that more pluralistic sense-making models tend to allow greater repertoires to negotiate uncertainty (Endicott, Bock & Narvaez, 2003), new sense-making might allow more innovative approaches to troublesome non-sense.

Moving on to explore how more established church members might better cope with non-sense, and making sense of self, it is worth questioning whether all aspects related to ayahuasca and oneself should make sense? Remembering that not all parts of our life make sense on a day-to-day basis, we are more than capable of backgrounding some complex or painful experiences that exist partially or almost completely outside or our understanding. Critically, sense and self-making does not

occur, just because we wish it, and may remain an ongoing act over several years or more. We must question therefore, whether we should always pursue sense-making, which is not an easy question to answer if the non-sense is not easily within our conceptual grasp. As a starting point, simple sense can always be sought including size, shape, colour, to help us develop a potential understanding of context. Having said this, we must remain open to the possibility that non-sense will remain, or that several iterative processes might be required to reach that "eureka!" moment. At the heart of this issue is that our mental resources can be limited, and successful innovation is not guaranteed.

While hallucinatory and visionary non-sense can exist at a relatively low-level, it is also possible for it to generate existential terrors and cosmology episodes, even for established church members. The challenge is therefore how to develop resilience through building 'enough' sense of the universe and self to move on with life. Even though we can pick preferred views, they must be plausible, at least to the individuals selecting them. The issue of what we consider plausible is somewhat thorny, as this study has shown that individuals tend to have pre-theorised notions of reality and themselves, typically outside of more rigorous philosophical, religious or scientific understanding. Within itself though, this may not be that problematic and ultimately depends on what is sought from sense-making. For example, do people want truth in an objective sense? Or are they looking for a personal 'truth' through something they prefer? These are critical questions when we consider that individuals consuming ayahuasca frequently seek spectacular changes of self, alongside perceptual 'validation', outside of what is commonly accepted as possible through a secular-materialist lens. I would suggest some caution though in setting modern materialism as the benchmark of all that is real, as such an approach is likely to undermine any notion that ayahuasca experiences are anything other than a perceptual aberration. Drawing this section to a close, the challenge for all church members, new and old, is to negotiate what they seek from reality, what they believe reality to be, and what barriers exist for any such desire and belief. This is important as not only do these churches need a shared sense of ethnometaphysical harmony, but they must consider how they can better exist in a world they consider evil, while trying to attract new members.

Having addressed some of the acute participant concerns, the following section explicitly addresses my experiences through personal reflexions, in order to further explicate my role as the ethnographer.

8.6. Personal Reflexions

Undertaking an ethnographic study on psychoactive consumption created an ongoing opportunity to explore not only participant sense- and self-making, but also my experiences related to this area. Having been an ayahuasca tourist, and being well acquainted with several global ayahuasca churches, allowed me to create a deeper understanding of myself related to sense- and self-making. As such, this section details pertinent aspects related to my background as a tourist, while also drawing out my experience as a researcher and how this informed my thinking.

As a starting point, I am a natural scientist specialising in examining biophysical phenomena through a secular-materialist lens, where the universe exists within a locked physics, with little possibility of the supernatural. However, and having said this, I am also a philosopher and theologian, being particularly interested in how immaterial actors might exist within this less than mundane cosmos, if at all. While these research areas may well be viewed as conflicting, they made me acutely aware of the potentially different sense-making models at work for those embracing materialist and spiritual views of the universe. More broadly, my dual sensitisation led to a greater appreciation on my part of the personal conflicts and social negotiations carried out by the participants as they struggled with the meaning of being human alongside trying to unpick the nature of reality. From personal experience, trying to make sense of oneself and the universe can be an unnerving task, especially so when we expose ourselves to the truth, that our understanding of life is at best limited, and psychological distress is never far away, the more we embrace the unknown.

Reflecting on my time as a tourist prior to this study, it was increasingly clear that ayahuasca can easily foreground any uncertainties in life, while challenging our pre-theorised ethnometaphysical, ontological and epistemological beliefs, no

matter how sound we believe them to be. This was something we also saw in this study, with all participants struggling to make sense and self, while trying to integrate otherworldly beliefs into their general lives. Addressing this aspect, it is worth saying that as we move through life, we often ignore and background what we find uncomfortable, and where possible, avoid the need to account for aspects outside of our perceptual understanding. For example, and even though I had a background looking at materialist and supernatural phenomena, alongside a reasonable understanding of different philosophical approaches to the world, I was not immune to non-sense, and frequently struggled to make sense of my ayahuasca experiences. Undertaking this ethnography frequently reminded me of how lost I had felt at times, particularly as my sense- and self-making models had been severely challenged and required urgent sense-making to re-establish order to my personal chaos. This being the case, I was intensely aware of the challenges facing the participants, particularly towards their ongoing need to make sense of non-sense, while withstanding the erosive nature of ayahuasca towards how we know ourselves within the world.

Observing the participants in this study, my time as a tourist was frequently brought back to life, further enhanced by seeing and smelling ayahuasca again, alongside watching numerous ayahuasca ceremonies, which was a stark reminder of what I had previously been through. Not surprisingly, this was a disturbing part of this ethnography, and something I was ill prepared for. Yet, to meaningfully carry out this study necessitated my ability to circumvent any personal challenges and turn my attention to elucidating participant sense- and self-making. This is not to suggest that I became an automaton observer, but rather that looking at the participants was also an act of looking at myself, and keeping records of both, while fastidiously interrogating the participant experience. In order to better understand my past experiences, I was drawn to re-reading my diaries from consuming ayahuasca, with selected aspects also being used to support the findings chapters. Of course, I could have consumed ayahuasca with the participants throughout this study, but as I explained earlier in Chapter 4, I viewed this act as potentially disruptive to my ability to function as the ethnographer. Being at the end of this study, I still believe that this was the correct approach due to the challenges related to travelling between

three churches, collecting data from forty-nine participants, writing this thesis and publishing papers.

Looking at the time spent in three churches, it clearly provided an important opportunity to mix with a relatively large sample, and to draw out multiple sense- and self-making processes. Having said this, and even though these samples were all located in the North of England, travelling time and general tiredness were often barriers to data collection and analysis. This issue was further compounded by ceremonies often being held on the same day in multiple churches. While I have carried out ethnographies prior to this study, this was the longest and most immersive study I have undertaken. Not surprisingly, it often felt that there was little respite from the sense-making challenges faced by the participants and in relation to my past experiences. When we consider that the participants were continually grappling with cosmological concerns about the nature of reality, and what it is to be human, it is worth noting that I was not immune from such thinking. As such, and spending so much time in organisations where the cultural norm is to explore the limits of reality and self, I routinely found myself speculating on what I thought was real, and who and what I am. Broadly speaking, I often revisited what I considered knowledge, alongside what is a reasonable approach to discerning reality, and finally, what I thought was really real. Importantly though, such thinking never induced a cosmology episode on my part, as I sat outside of existential terrors, unlike the participants in this study.

With stigmatisation of ayahuasca being a common concern amongst the participants, it is also worth mentioning that undertaking this study frequently led to criticisms of myself as the researcher. Problematically, it seems that to engage in a psychoactive community, is to invite criticism of ourselves, irrespective of whether we consume the sacrament. With regards to this study, it was clear my research had made some of my former academic colleagues and friends uncomfortable, with a prevalent view arising that (1) I was legitimising drug use, (2) potentially encouraging others to embrace illicit products, (3) supporting criminality, and (4) carrying out Satanic work, or (5) being immoral in some way. Broadly speaking, this was a useful aspect, as it allowed an ongoing ability to empathise with the participants about such concerns.

Finally, and having revisited my memories of consuming ayahuasca alongside assessing the participants in this study, I believe this has been a cathartic experience, allowing me to further contextualise my journey through the psychoactive realms against my post-ayahuasca experiences. Broadly speaking, this study has left me with a variety of key questions about what ayahuasca might reveal about who we are, and our perception of reality as an individualistic and shared endeavour. Being keen to continue this research, the following section examines future work, and how I can build on this ethnography.

8.7. Limitations

Even though this study extended the current literature and increased our understanding of (1) the practicalities of forming a psychoactive religion in the UK, and (2) the processes related to making sense and self in relation to ayahuasca non-sense, it is fair to say that there were limitations. While it is beyond the scope of this study to examine all such aspects, this section will draw out the most salient constraints so that we can better contextualise this work.

Even though the three participant churches broadly welcomed this study, all churches prohibited my interaction with the participants during the ayahuasca ceremonies, in order to limit sense- and self-making being disturbed. Critically though, it was increasingly clear that there were times that the participants wanted to convey their experiences but had to wait until the ceremonies had finished. This was unfortunate, as this limited data collection to participant recollection, rather than verbally detailing or writing down their experiences as they occurred. When we consider that our ability to remember ayahuasca experiences can be limited, particularly where there has been a myriad of hallucinations and visions, the ability to collect real-time data might provide a clearer window into sense- and self-making. Exploring this issue further, listening to how sense and self are made as it happens, might reveal how consequent social sense-making constrains these individualistic processes.

Reflecting on my time in these churches, it was clear that my understanding of how ayahuasca was prepared would be limited, due to concerns about my lack of spiritual cleanliness from refusing to drink this brew and commune with the goddess. While I respected this view, it impacted on a couple of key aspects related to this study, including (1) how this brew was physically prepared, and (2) how the religious ceremonial elements were undertaken in relation to this concoction. Addressing the physicality of the brew first, it is fair to say that while all churches detailed the plants used in ayahuasca, i.e., *Banisteriopsis caapi* and *Psychotria viridis*, nothing was gleamed about the process used to produce this sacrament. Importantly though, how ayahuasca looked often varied between ceremonies, with general conversations amongst participants appearing to indicate that this brew was altered depending on what the ceremony sought to achieve. If the brew was changed in strength or constituency, this might suggest that the participants believed that the physicality of ayahuasca is a foundation to how it interacts with the body, potentially even indicating a form of materialism, albeit probably not secular materialism. We might therefore ask, is Ayahuasca invoked as part of this brew's preparation? Or is there some other process? And just as importantly, how does Ayahuasca exist within ayahuasca? Critically, and as we might imagine, this line of questioning suggests there is much to understand about the nature of this immaterial being within the material universe.

Finally, and with no new members joining these churches throughout the ethnographic stage, it was not possible to collect data on 'virgin' sense- and self-makers in relation to non-sensical ayahuasca visions and hallucinations. Problematically, this inability to explore this aspect meant that a poverty of understanding still exists for those new to ayahuasca and how they circumvent or become enmeshed within cosmology episodes and existential terrors. In other words, the participants in this study had already experienced overwhelming non-sense before this study started, and to better understand this aspect, examining newcomers might be more insightful.

8.8. Future Work

Not surprisingly from a study that has drawn on several literatures to answer the research question, a myriad of themes has emerged for future research with the most salient being detailed in this section. Before detailing these aspects, it is worth noting that my standing as a researcher shifted throughout my time in these three churches. For example, and while I was initially welcomed as a quasi-insider as a consequence of having been an ayahuasca tourist, I was in essence, relatively unknown to these church congregations, meaning that trust had to be established throughout the ethnographic stage. However, and embedding myself within these religious organisations allowed a deeper level of closeness with these participants, with invitations being made by all three churches to extend this ethnography.

The first suggestion for further work is to examine failed sense- and self-makers through contacting former church members who abandoned their new religions, supposedly due to conflicting sense-making. This is probably the most tenuous area to suggest, as while these churches have offered to pass my contact details on to their former members, it is not known whether there would be an interest in providing information about failed sense- and self-making. Assuming however, that these individuals might facilitate further study, consideration will be made towards understanding making the 'wrong' sense in opposition to preferred church master narratives. Importantly, little is known about such ethnometaphysical conflicts, or how individuals reintegrate into their former quasi-secular lives after abandoning faith in a psychoactive religion. For example, how do such individuals reposition ayahuasca? And negotiate potential self-stigmatisation if they come to view ayahuasca as a drug? (Prayag, 2015; Siff, 2015; Tupper, 2008).

The second area to be explored is the 'virgin' ayahuasca sense- and self-maker, i.e., the new church member who has no experience of consuming psychoactives, and as such, has few sense-making resources to build resilience to ayahuasca non-sense. By taking this approach, there is the potential to better track the emergence of cosmology episodes from those who have no experience of this phenomenon (Orton & O'Grady, 2016), while drawing out how these churches function as

ethnometaphysical communication channels to guide and constrain how new members make sense and self (Purchase et al., 2018).

The third area for investigation is how ethnometaphysical conflicts are negotiated, and how sense- and self-making are storied into full church narratives and doctrines. While this study overviewed how stories in progress were foregrounded or backgrounded in relation to preferred organisational sense, it is fair to say that a gap of knowledge still exists for how stories come into being. This area will be approached through exploring antenarratives, with an antenarrative being a 'fragmented, non-linear, incoherent, collective, unplotted, and pre-narrative speculation, a bet' (Boje 2001, p. 1). Simply speaking, antenarratives exist in a formative stage, i.e., a work in progress, where multiple interpretations of reality exist, and a beginning, middle and end are still to be elucidated (Iveroth and Hallencreutz 2015). Importantly, analysing antenarratives can highlight how personal and organisational legitimacy are reworked, and which discursive ethnometaphysical tactics allow new master narratives to concretise new doctrinal views (Varra and Tienari 2011).

The fourth aspect to be considered is the nature of sense and self-making and the underlying reasons for this shift away from rationalism to more mythological and religious explanations of the cosmos. Reflecting on the findings sections, it was clear that much of the participant sense-making lacked process and explanation beyond citing the supernatural. Not surprisingly, this act put the participants at odds with many of the extant sense-making models currently in operation within their wider societies, where empiricism was broadly replaced with otherworldly explanations of ayahuasca. At the heart of this issue is the intent to understand the extent to which the participants undertook religious sense-making as a tactic to background their lack of understanding of what it is to be human in the universe, or whether ayahuasca is a constraining force, funnelling sense towards religiosity.

The fifth area seeks to understand the ontological nature of ayahuasca, and how the goddess Ayahuasca occupies space in this otherworldly brew. As mentioned in the previous section on 'limitations', what is the process for a divine spirit to exist in ayahuasca? This is a thorny issue when we consider that ayahuasca is typically

made from at least two plant constituents, raising the question about whether ayahuasca exists in both plants prior to the brew being made? Or is ayahuasca invoked as part of the brew's preparation? Fundamentally, why would a material brew be required to allow access to the spirit realms? While this is clearly an important philosophical and theological line of investigation, it must be noted that we can learn much about sense- and self-making processes from how participants address these concerns.

The sixth and last area to be considered is the supposed magical nature of ayahuasca as a medical panacea, and how these churches responded to the Covid-19 pandemic. Reminding ourselves that the main ethnographic stage was completed before Covid-19 spread throughout the UK, and with the write-up stage of this thesis being underway as the virus spread, this issue received relatively little attention during this period. While it was clear that the participants did not wish to speak about whether they were having ayahuasca meetings during this time, it is worth noting that there was a prevalent belief that ayahuasca prevents all communicable diseases, and that ill health occurs due to evil rather than viral infection. Considering that Covid-19 was widespread through the North of England, it is interesting to explore how the participants negotiated their personal risks, and whether they maintained that ayahuasca would provide immunity against 'fake' materialist infections such as Covid-19. Thus, and while ayahuasca is frequently promoted as a 'silver bullet' (Drug Science, 2020), little is known about this aspect, and the extent to which such beliefs can withstand not only a global pandemic, but the surrounding cultural view this infection is caused by a material agent. Of particular interest is whether extensive cultural communication about this pathogen undermined participant cosmologies and church doctrines, where all a person needs to be healthy is devotion to ayahuasca.

Finally, it is worth saying that by undertaking this ethnographic study in the UK, that our understanding of how sense is made of ayahuasca non-sense has been increased, particularly through the lens of non-traditional knowledge production. More broadly, and with limited consideration typically given to how non-sense is processed within mundane and psychoactive states, that this study has created a platform to further interrogate cognitive and social sense-making.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Research Statement

Prior to this study, this document was shared with ayahuasca community insiders I had met from being an ayahuasca tourist, who were asked to communicate this study's intent and need for participants.

Hello,

I would like to ask for your support in research I am carrying out for an Ethnobiology PhD in the School of Anthropology and Conservation at the University of Kent. The research project is called: 'Making sense of ayahuasca non-sense: An ethnobiological study' and aims to answer the question: '*How is sense made of ayahuasca non-sense?*' Simply, I would like to explore how individuals consuming ayahuasca understand their experiences. If possible, and over the next year, I would like to spend time with you, observing, interviewing, listening to and recording your experiences in relation to ayahuasca. This will include multiple meetings, but only at your convenience. Everything you say will be confidential and anonymous, and you will be in control of how much information is shown about you. Having said this, if you agree to this study, your thoughts may be used as part of my PhD thesis at Kent and presented in academic publications and presentations. You will of course be free to withdraw at any point and will not be expected to provide any reason for doing so. Should this happen, all research materials will be returned to you, and I will erase all information from our meetings. If, however, you would like to take part in this study, please sign this document. For further discussion, I can be reached at akd26@kent.ac.uk, with my supervisor Dr Anna Waldstein also being available to address any queries or concerns via: a.waldstein@kent.ac.uk and

I hereby agree to support this research:

Name: Date:

Signature:

Appendix B: Exemplar CA of Salient Themes

Frequency of theme occurring: ✓ less than two pages, ✓✓ between three to five pages; ✓✓✓ more than five pages.

ID	Hallucinatory non-sense					Visionary non-sense				
	Unknowable features	Unknown meaning	Distress	Existential terrors	Cosmology episode	Unknowable features	Unknown meaning	Distress	Existential terrors	Cosmology episode
1. Kristi	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓
2. William	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓
3. Frank	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓
4. Caius	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓
5. Kristi	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓	✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓
6. Vincent	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓
7. Craig	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓
8. Deborah	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓
9. Sylvia	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓	✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓	✓✓✓
10. Benny	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓
11. Felix	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓	✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓
12. Steph	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓
13. Ian	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓
14. Daniel	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓	✓✓✓
15. Andre	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓
16. Julius	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓
17. Carly	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓
18. Anita	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓
19. Seb	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓	✓✓✓
20. JJ	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓
21. Stanley	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓

22. Mark	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓
23. Elijah	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓
24. Bailey	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓	✓
25. Ash	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓	✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓
26. Sue	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓	✓✓✓
27. Ken	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓
28. Gary	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓
29. Mary	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓	✓✓✓
30. Shelley	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓	✓✓✓
31. Nat	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓
32. Brandi	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓
33. Sally	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓
34. Cody	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓
35. Alex	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓
36. Chris	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓
37. Nick	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓
38. Terry	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓
39. Joe	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓
40. Rick	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓	✓✓✓
41. Margo	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓
42. Stuart	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓
43. Heidi	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓
44. Ray	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓
45. Evi	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓	✓✓✓
46. Robin	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓
47. April	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓
48. Irini	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓
49. Peter	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓

Table 16. CA of salient sense-making themes. This table depicts hallucinatory and visionary non-sense, with many such tables examining other pertinent factors.

Appendix C: Initial Coding

This section shows four examples of analytical coding, with each example highlighting a different aspect of interest. Not surprisingly, there were many analytical coding tables per sense- and self-making area, and with this appendix being purely demonstrative.

Main theme	**Hallucinatory non-sense**
Phenomenon	Experiencing the non-sensical.
Relevance	Descriptions focussing on the unknown fragmented views of reality.
Participant descriptions	'… I just couldn't understand what I saw.' '… it really didn't make any sense no matter how many times I looked at it.' 'Hallucinations often don't make sense.'
Wider context	That reality should be discernible and knowable.

Main theme	**Cosmology episode**
Phenomenon	Feeling lost in an unknowable universe.
Relevance	Incoherent views of sense and self.
Participant descriptions	'… I was completely lost, not knowing who I was.' 'I forgot who I was and was adrift in a messy world.' 'When everything around you collapses, so do you.'
Wider context	Chaos as something that befalls and overwhelms us.

Main theme	**Sense-making**
Phenomenon	Processing chaos and incoherence into knowable sense.
Relevance	Use of stories, narratives and metaphors to create simpler and preferred sense.
Participant descriptions	'I needed to make sense of everything again.' 'I had to bring an end to this chaos.' 'It started slowly, and as a way to regain my life.'
Wider context	Order should be a pervasive part of life.

Main theme	**Identity work**
Phenomenon	Working towards an idealised notion of self.
Relevance	Use of stories and metaphors to create simpler preferred views of self.
Participant descriptions	'I wanted to become the magical me I'd always wanted.' 'Why shouldn't I be a shaman?' 'Everyone used to do magic and being here is a way to remember all that we lost as a species.'
Wider context	That self-making and sense-making are intimately linked.

Table 17. Initial coding.

Appendix D: CDA examination of Self-Making

This appendix shows how transcribed data was analysed in relation to identity work, highlighting the role of purifying self in religious sense-making. This conversation took place in the second month of this ethnography between Caius and Craig (Church A).

Sample conversation 142:

13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28	**Caius:** I saw it in a vision yesterday. I saw everyone here drinking ayahuasca and her spirit was inside it as we all supped it. Then she was inside us. I watched and saw her divine grace spread throughout our bodies, removing our sin, and lighting us up inside. **Craig:** Yes, I think I understand what you mean. So, you really think this is what happens? Now I think about it, I like what you're saying. It makes a lot of sense to me, and, mmm, y'know it probably works like this. This is why we are different to the rest of the world. Why we are saved and why they are damned. **Caius:** It's good to know you like this, and you should because I think it is true. **Craig:** This is amazing! [Exclaims]. I think there'll be a lot of support for this. It really supports what we are all about here. **Caius:** Yeah, but people should believe it because it's true. But if we all like it and Ayahuasca is guiding, then of course it is true. I mean, the test is what everyone else thinks about it. I'll raise this later today when everyone else arrives, and then we can see if anyone has ever seen this. If they have then I think this proves me right.

Table 18. CDA examination of self-making.

In lines 13-16 we see Caius promoting the metaphysical concepts that ayahuasca was present in the brew as individuals consumed it, leading to these congregation members being purified. These first four lines also suggest a simple process for how spiritual detoxification takes place, emphasising key concepts such as drinking this brew "removing our sin" and "lighting us up inside". Such comments show that Caius will invite the wider church to embrace his sense-making perspective, arguing for a collective good within his view of ayahuasca. In this way, we might consider whether this tactic is a way to reduce the barrier for any member to codify their experience as reality, by only detailing benefits to the group. Furthermore, there is little to suggest that this new sense will conflict with extant sense-making models, thus, potentially reducing barriers for this sense to be adopted.

Looking at Craig's response in lines 17-20, we see repeated agreement for this new process of purification, linked with the question: "So, you really think this is what happens?", inviting Caius to further explain his vision. It is worth noting that as only Caius and Craig were present at this time, that this was a formative stage of potential sense-making, and as such, an opportunity to explore the nuance of this storied process before other members arrived. Critically though, we see powerful support from Craig via his comment: "This is why we are different to the rest of the world", not only positioning ayahuasca as a means to remove sin but as a way to demarcate 'clean' church members from a spiritually 'unclean' society. Observing this interaction, there seemed much fervour on the part of both individuals to create this rigid demarcation of "the saved" from "the damned". Having said this, the linguistic choices used by Craig suggest some initial caution for this view of ayahuasca rather than taking it as fact, highlighted by the comments: "I *like* what you're saying" and "it *probably* works like this". Considering that this new sense-making suggestion still had to be overviewed by the wider church, we might wonder whether this approach gave Craig an opportunity to change his mind.

Examining line 21-23, we see Caius attempting to persuade Craig about the truth of his vision, with liking a concept being argued as a means to discern truth. Fundamentally though, and trying to speak for the wider church, Craig concluded that positioning ayahuasca in this way, "really supports what we are all about here". As such, we again come back to the notion of sense-making seeking preferred outcomes relative to shared sense-making.

Finally, and in lines 24-28, Caius's epistemology starts to be revealed, albeit somewhat duplicitously. For example, and while Caius on line 24 argued that preference was an unreasonable approach to truth, on the same line, and on line 25, this is contradicted by the claim: "But if we all like it and Ayahuasca is guiding, then of course it is true". Critically, the difference is that if the goddess Ayahuasca supports a collective belief, then naturally, the participants should also like it, with preference being a road to true justified belief. It does raise the question however about whether Ayahuasca is able or willing to interfere with participant agency. Finally, we see Caius turning to shared sensory experiences as a further form of validation, where shared experiences in the ayahuasca realms also dictate truth.