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# A stranger in a strange land: negotiating supernatural 'fact' and 'fiction' within visions and hallucinations in non-traditional ayahuasca churches

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## Abstract

For thousands of years, potent psychoactive potions such as ayahuasca have helped magico-religious practitioners make sense of this life and the next. Although historically confined to indigenous South American communities, Europeans are increasingly consuming ayahuasca to experience (im)possible supernatural realities within immersive hallucinations and visions. Of course, whether these perceptual psychoactive experiences are real or just pharmacological fictions of mind is an acute epistemological concern. With little known about this otherworldly issue, this ethnographic study examines how neo-European ayahuasca church members negotiate supernatural 'fact' and 'fiction' outside of traditional religious, psychological, and philosophical knowledge. Key findings show that while ayahuasca catalyses intense supernatural beliefs, it also leaves individuals epistemologically struggling to cope with the vulnerabilities of their mundane lives and ongoing threat of social stigmatisation. However, with these churches acting as otherworldly 'gatekeepers', new congregants must work to embrace totalising supernatural doctrines or lose access to these fairy tale lands forever.

**Keywords:** Psychoactive; Ayahuasca; Supernatural; Vision; Hallucination.

## 1. Introduction

As a species, we seem hardwired to ruminate on what it means to be human within a complex cosmos (Clements, 2017; Stewart, Gapenne and Di Paolo, 2014). While our mundane senses are a key part of this endeavour, we also like to play with what is perceptually possible and explore otherworldly lands through what we consume (Shanon, 2010; Waldstein, 2016). Not surprisingly, this has led to ongoing epistemological questions about the ontological status of supernatural experiences, and epistemically, whether any of what we see might be true. Problematically, modern secular-material scientists generally argue that the supernatural is unreal, and that such experiences are perceptual aberrations arising from an overactive imagination, embodied pathologies, or drugs (Tupper, 2008). Yet, even though researching the supernatural tends to be taboo

(Escolar, 2012; West, 2007), there is little to suggest that it has been epistemologically 'debunked' or that religious experiences are receding in day-to-day life (Saad, 2018). If anything, industrialised Western nations are seeing a resurgence in religious beliefs and supernatural ways of knowing (Araújo, Carillo and Sampaio, 2021; Vallert, 2021).

One such religious area currently receiving much attention is the consumption of the brew, ayahuasca, which is increasingly used to experience supernatural hallucinations and dream-like visions (Dean, 2019). What is particularly interesting about ayahuasca is its ability to overturn long-held metaphysical views, and catalyse new supernatural beliefs (Shanon, 2010). With relatively little known about how these religious aspects are undertaken by neo-ayahuasca groups inside industrialised nations, this ethnography asks: how do new, non-expert congregants negotiate supernatural 'fact' and 'fiction' within non-traditional ayahuasca churches? Helping us understand this question, the literature review starts by examining 'ayahuasca: a potent psychoactive potion' before exploring how individuals experience ayahuasca via 'psychoactive perception'. After describing our ethnographic 'methodology,' we present our 'findings' on how participants became involved with these new, non-traditional ayahuasca churches, as well as how new congregants experience and make sense of the otherworldly nature of ayahuasca, focussing on contexts that lack the scaffolding provided in indigenous ceremonies and more established ayahuasca churches. In the 'discussion and conclusions' we reflect further on how the doctrines of non-traditional ayahuasca churches support congregants in making sense of ayahuasca visions, but also create philosophical and psychological tensions. Finally, contributions to the literature are shown, as well as potential areas for future research.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Ayahuasca: a potent psychoactive potion

Throughout recorded history, we have continued to develop intimate metaphysical relationships with psychoactive plants to meet the cultural needs of different times (McKenna, 1999). Simply speaking, psychoactive plants contain natural pharmacological constituents, that when consumed induce altered states of consciousness, and otherworldly ways of perceptual knowing. Although psychoactives remain niche within industrialised nations, there is a growing interest in using brews, herbal mixtures, and

potions such as ayahuasca to transcend the mundane and explore what is possible within otherworldly states of consciousness (Gandy *et al.*, 2022). Unlike many other natural psychoactives, ayahuasca is not a single plant, but is instead a brew composed of *Banisteriopsis caapi* vines (Harris, 2010), and *Psychotria viridis* leaves (Ott, 1994). Linguistically, the name ayahuasca is derived from the Quecha language, with *aya* referring to a dead person, spirit, or soul (Whitten, 1976), and *huasca* meaning vine (Naranjo, 1983). Consequently, ayahuasca means vine of the soul, soul vine or bitter vine (Schultes and Hofman, 1979). Having said this, several other common names exist, including, daime, yage, mii, caapi, and kahi (Naranjo, 1983). Throughout this study, numerous Western terms are at times used such as psychedelic and fairy tale, and while they offer a particular loaded metaphysical perspective, this linguistic framing closely follows the participants' views and descriptions of their ayahuasca experiences.

As an indigenous South American sacrament, ayahuasca has been used for at least two thousand years, typically within magico-religious ceremonies to induce otherworldly states of consciousness, visions, and hallucinations (Ott, 1994). In recent decades however, knowledge of ayahuasca has rapidly spread throughout the industrialised West, helped by spectacular supernatural claims that this brew not only reveals the secrets of the universe, but will cure the sick, and help access otherworldly realms (Holman, 2011). Although ayahuasca has long been positioned as a supernatural potion, secular-materialist science is also showing that not only is this brew generally safe to drink, but that it has therapeutic properties (da Motta *et al.*, 2018). For example, it is increasingly clear that ayahuasca induces heightened states of suggestibility, allowing individuals to rework traumatic memories and develop more positive perspectives within cathartic hallucinations and visions (Bouso and Riba, 2014).

With ayahuasca still undergoing medical research, it is only currently available as an unregulated religious sacrament, meaning that individuals must travel to South American indigenous communities, or consume it within an ever-growing number of European ayahuasca churches (da Motta *et al.*, 2018; Introvigne, Hanegraaff and Folk, 2020). While motivations often vary, most pursue ayahuasca to achieve personal transformation, true knowledge, experience the supernatural, show reality as it really is, and overturn extant metaphysical views of the universe (Jiménez-Garrido *et al.*, 2020). Problematically, though, when we consider that it can take thousands of years to develop rich systems

of knowledge to adequately explain otherworldly phenomena, we should not be surprised that industrialised countries are still struggling to make metaphysical sense of ayahuasca, especially when traditional knowledge is backgrounded (Frood, 2015). Helping us understand more about these aspects, the following section ruminates on psychoactive perception and what we might consider real.

## 2.2. Psychoactive perception

While our mundane senses allow us to perceive the physical world around us (Stewart, Gapenne and Di Paolo, 2014), supernatural experiences are never far away, whether perceptually real or imagined, particularly when psychoactives such as ayahuasca are close at hand (McKenna, 2004). Upon drinking ayahuasca, hallucinations quickly appear, as our consciousness slips into a waking visionary dream (Chen and Berrios, 1996), and while we can usually open our eyes during these periods, it can be physically and psychologically exhausting to do so, at least until the effects wear off (Domínguez-Clavé *et al.*, 2016). Like a fairy tale, these experiences often take place within a variety of fantastical lands, where magical creatures guide us through painful memories and liberating visions, before a sense of personal transformation and salvation are achieved (Shanon, 2010).

Not surprisingly, there is much epistemological debate about the ontological status of these otherworldly experiences, and whether we should consider them real (Luke, 2011; St John, 2015). Commenting on this, Winkelman (2018, p. 5) argued, do psychoactive experiences 'represent noumena' i.e., 'manifestations of a real transcendent reality, or are they merely phenomena produced by our complex brains' being 'nothing more than dream-like hallucinatory experiences'. Reflecting on this, if ayahuasca is just a secular-material drug, and the supernatural is unreal, then all hallucinations and visions are just distortions of reality (Strassman, 2001; Weil and Rosen, 1993). Having said this, even the unreal can be 'incorporated into knowledge systems' and form a foundation for our rich cosmological tapestries (Messori, 2021, p. 340). Alternatively, if ayahuasca is more than mundane, it is possible that otherworldly experiences might be veridical accounts of the supernatural (Siegel and West, 1975).

As a third option, we might consider whether a secular pharmacological agent can trigger our biological structures to undertake supernatural functions, and in so doing, look beyond the material and perceive the otherworldly. While we are a long way from elucidating this issue, it is worth considering that 'we are beginning to understand

spiritual experience not as something apart from the physical human but rather bound up with human matter...'. In other words, that 'matter and spirit are no longer seen to be opposed but are indeed mutually related...' (Delio, 2003, p. 43). The challenge, therefore, is to pay attention to how psychoactive brews such as ayahuasca catalyse the perception of religious realities (Newberg, 2010; Prickett and Liester, 2014; Salin and Tanabria, 2017), while also remembering that supernatural experiences are mediated through our environment, personal motivations, and what is believed possible within any culture (Conway and Loveday, 2015; Deeley, 2004; Luhrmann, Nusbaum and Thisted, 2010).

Although beliefs in the supernatural are relatively common (Silva and Woody, 2022), there are often acute epistemological and social issues with otherworldly experiences arising from psychoactives. For example, with the term psychedelic typically being framed as illicit drugs in the industrialised West, few are willing to risk stigmatisation by consuming these products, and even if they do, are unlikely to speak about their experiences (Siff, 2015; Tupper, 2008). Furthermore, the fact that psychoactive supernatural experiences are not commonly shared tends to undermine their epistemic credibility, leaving many to conclude they are just the side effects of a drug. Critically though, the purpose of this study is not to state whether any hallucination or vision is true or false, but rather to examine how individuals negotiate supernatural fact and fiction within their non-traditional churches. Drawing this literature review to a close, the next section details how the research question was answered.

### 3. Methodology

With the lead author having spent over a decade interacting with European and South American ayahuasca churches, it was clear that this brew can trigger acute epistemological tensions about the ontological status of otherworldly hallucinations and visions. To help understand this issue, this hybrid ethnography (Lofland and Lofland, 1995) was undertaken in several European syncretic ayahuasca churches, where the lead author slowly became a trusted and seasoned insider (Layton, 1988; McCracken, 1998). The decision to work with non-traditional, i.e., non-indigenous churches was pragmatic, allowing a sample of twenty-one participants to be pulled together to answer the research question. Inclusion criteria mandated that (1) no participant had any experience of consuming psychoactives prior to joining their churches, and (2) were within the first three months of their church membership. Participant doubts about whether to continue consuming ayahuasca was not a barrier to inclusion, nor was their motivation

for pursuing this brew. *Table 1* provides the purposeful and anonymised sample of participants that this study was built around (Wengraf, 2004):

Participant characteristics	Frequency	Percentage
Gender:		
Male	11	52
Female	10	48
Age (years):		
18-30	3	14
31-40	7	33
41-50	6	29
51-60	3	14
61-70	1	5
70 +	1	5
Education		
School	5	24
Bachelor's degree	13	62
Masters and above	3	14
Religion		
Christian	8	38
Pagan	13	62
Cultural Christian		
No	0	0
Yes	21	100
Motivation		
Bereavement	6	29
Health	5	24
To see reality as it really is	3	14
To experience the supernatural	7	33

*Table 1. Participant demographic information.*

Looking at table 1, we see a well-educated sample, searching for miraculous cures and supernatural experiences through ayahuasca. Although previous religious beliefs varied, this sample was considered culturally Christian, as all participants had received this form of instruction as children and grown up within social structures influenced by Christianity (Moffat and Yoo, 2019).

Importantly, with all churches being located throughout Europe, but sitting outside of membership of religions such as Santo Daime, União do Vegetal, and Barquinha, they were considered non-traditional as they had no demonstrable links to indigenous peoples, beliefs, or practices. **It is also worth noting that these religious organisations were relatively young, as all were less than ten years old, and had less than thirty members each. In this way, the inexperience of these churches created a fertile ground to explore the negotiation of ayahuasca within emerging metaphysical doctrines regarding the mundane and supernatural.** Within itself, this is not to suggest that

(pre)theorised Christian themes were not salient in these psychoactive churches, but that unlike in previous studies, ancient indigenous knowledge was rarely drawn on to make sense of psychoactive experiences (Dobkin de Rios, 1972; Luna, 1986), nor was cultural Christianity used to re-interpret indigenous beliefs or practices (Dean, 2019).

### **3.1. Fieldwork and Data Collection**

After securing access to these several churches, the first author (Dean) spent just over one year building in-depth relationships with these samples (Gould, 2006; Hamilton, Dunnett and Downey, 2012), not only in person, but also using VoIP (Voice over Internet Protocol) technologies, such as Skype, WhatsApp, e-mail, and phone calls (Fetterman, 2010; Iacono, Symonds and Brown, 2016). Ethnographic data collection used participant observation, including interviews, conversations, surveys, diaries, alongside autoethnographic experiences (Schouten, McAlexander and Koenig, 2007). What mattered most was providing ongoing opportunities to collect data, and for the participants to feedback their thoughts and experiences, irrespective of how trivial they appeared at the time. While access to the participants was commonly available, the ayahuasca ceremonies were always off limits to safeguard congregant experiences. Critically, over fifteen hundred pages of transcripts were collected, alongside three hundred pages of fieldnotes, and over four hundred diary pages. This led to a mean number of approximately nine thousand words per participant. To help clarify meaning, body language and vocal intonations were also recorded in relation to what was said.

### **3.2. Working the Data**

After the data was collected, it was transcribed and read several times to create an overall awareness of potential emerging themes (Arnould, 1993; Lindlof, 1995). The initial analysis took place within two days of data collection, with further analyses being carried out after three and six months (Spiggle, 1994). Importantly, content analysis was used to show the frequency of salient themes, with further contextualisation being against our emic understanding, and in relation to the literature (Goodier and Eisenberg, 2006; Kottak, 2006). This process was aided by attention being paid to the different ways that the participants described reality (Foucault, 1974), with 'reflexive pragmatism' (Alvesson, 2003, p. 14) and vignettes highlighting multiple interpretations (Humphreys, 2005). To increase quality, within method triangulation compared findings between

participants and methods (Denzin, 1970). Finally, the participants were debriefed, and summary reports were shown, with further feedback being taken (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

## 4. Findings

This section answers the research question: how do new, non-expert congregants negotiate supernatural ‘fact’ and ‘fiction’ within non-traditional ayahuasca churches? As a starting point, an exploration is made of the participant motivations for ‘pursuing a psychoactive potion’. Following this, our attention turns to understanding ‘the otherworldly nature of ayahuasca’, before finally examining the challenges and approaches used in ‘making sense of the supernatural’.

### 4.1. Pursuing a psychoactive potion

Although psychoactives are ubiquitous throughout the natural world and reasonably accessible within industrialised nations, it must be said that few of us will ever attempt to transcend the limits of mundane perception via a powerful potion. Consequently, this has created a poverty of experiential understanding about psychoactives, and left many enmeshed within a myriad of psychedelic tall tales and stereotypes, as David explained:

Psychedelics have a bad reputation. Have done for a long time. Even the Bible criticises them. [Pause]. I’d always thought people taking psychedelics are criminals, druggies, or mentally ill. Nobody shows kindness on this matter. Neither did I until recently. Have you heard? Some guys even believe psychedelics trigger demonic possession. Personally, I blame Hollywood for this. But there again, I used to believe a lot of this stuff too. [Pause]. Fate, however, is not without a sense of irony, and I came to understand this as I became a convert to ayahuasca. [Pause]. You don’t start taking psychedelics lightly though. Especially when you can lose everyone you care about and your job. Virtually nobody takes them, but everyone has an opinion. The reality is that people have always been terrified of tasting this forbidden fruit.

With psychoactives long being considered ‘forbidden fruit’, it was not surprising that the participants had spent most of their lives criticising their use and avoiding their

consumption. Against this background, we might imagine that any attempt to overhaul such ingrained negative beliefs would be a fraught act, risking social, financial, and religious condemnation. Helping us understand what motivated these participants to pursue a psychoactive, and break their previous beliefs, Steven argued:

I know what you are thinking. Why would anyone want to take a psychedelic? I mean, I never woke up thinking “I really need to take a psychedelic today.” Never happened. It was trickier than that. I was trying to escape my suffering. Searching for answers about the afterlife. [Pause]. A lot of people are searching for their dead relatives. Want to know they are ok. Others want to see magic. Explore other realms. Visit Heaven. Some come with serious addictions or an incurable disease. There are a lot of reasons buddy. [Pause]. Most are looking to start a new life. Create a new version of themselves. Get rid of their ailments, grief, loneliness, insecurities, and even their fear of death. All are searching for genuine miracles. Everyone here had exhausted all the normal cures. Seen counsellors. Taken medicines. I’d gone back to church hoping to find God. Didn’t work. All I found was an empty building. So many religions just talk about the supernatural. Everyone here wanted something that went beyond faith. A real religion. To see the supernatural. [Pause]. Many of us were desperate when we came across ayahuasca.

We thus come to see that these participants had often suffered some form of physical, mental, or spiritual trauma, and were looking for ayahuasca to overhaul their lives. There was, however, little to suggest that any participant had initially sought a psychoactive or had any previous experience with a mind-altering substance. Instead, these individuals claimed to have iteratively ‘exhausted’ the more common cultural repertoire of medical and religious approaches, and in their desperation, had turned to a more fantastical product in the form of ayahuasca. Being willing to embrace the ‘magic’ of ayahuasca was not without some initial trepidation however, as Kate commented:

I’d pretty much given up. I’d searched every alternative medicine I could think of. I remember the first time I saw ayahuasca on YouTube. I was shocked. Intrigued. Disappointed it was a psychedelic. But could it be really do all these things? I hoped so. I needed it to be true. [Pause]. I felt myself being infected by what ayahuasca promised. I started imagining it changing me. Giving me everything I’d ever needed. The stuff of miracles. The chance to start again. [Pause]. When I saw indigenous people invented it, I knew I could trust it. I’ve always trusted them. To me they

are still living in the Garden of Eden. No corruption or anything. We sin. They don't. I've always suspected ancient medicines can solve our modern problems. [Pause]. From what I read, ayahuasca has been saving lives for such a long time. Healing us and letting us explore the afterlife. [Pause]. I could have gone to South America, but it was cheaper staying close to home. So, I sent them an e-mail, and every day they spoke to me, always inviting me, saying my salvation was at hand.

While phantasmagorical promises are relatively common in religious marketing, successful recruitment of new congregants seemed to be in positioning ayahuasca as an indigenous product, tantamount to an otherworldly panacea, irrespective of the lack of traditional ancient knowledge within these neo-ayahuasca churches. Importantly, this approach appeared to satisfy participant desires for an ancient and miraculous Edenic medicine that could resolve acute personal problems and give access to supernatural lands and beings. Furthermore, as active psychoactive sellers, these churches were rarely bystanders in this sample's decision-making, and where possible, frequently guided these participants towards consuming this otherworldly brew, often through providing enough metaphysical sense that sounded 'about right' to 'enchant' virgin ayahuasca consumers. How the participants experienced ayahuasca is addressed in the following section.

#### **4.2. The otherworldly nature of ayahuasca**

With no participant having consumed a psychoactive prior to this study, it seems fair to say that there had been a variety of expectations, usually positive, which were frequently violated by ayahuasca to some degree. Troublingly, and as we will come to see, there is little in modern life that can adequately prepare the mind or body for an immersive hallucinatory and visionary ayahuasca experience, as Susan said:

I'd spent a lot of time trying to imagine what ayahuasca would be like. Watching videos and reading reviews. I'd heard some people have a rough time and vomit. Honestly, all I could do was hope for the best. [Pause]. I thought it'd be ok. Drink ayahuasca, have some visions. See some bad memories, be released from my suffering, and start my perfect new life. I was very wrong about all of this. [Pause]. Before ayahuasca, my only experience of the supernatural had been watching movies or taking the Holy Eucharist [Christian sacrament of bread and wine]. These things never changed me. [Pause]. Thinking back to when I used to be a

Christian, I'd thought about Heaven, but had no clue what it would be like other than a great place. My thinking never went beyond daydreaming. [Pause]. Ayahuasca on the other hand, smashed me to bits. [Pause]. Over the years, I've been drunk. Lost control of my body. Hallucinated in a fever. But these things were nothing like ayahuasca. [Pause]. Ayahuasca is unique. No amount of imagining or watching videos will get you ready for this crippling supernatural wonderland. And once you've taken it, you will spend the rest of your life trying to understand it.

Functionally, while would-be congregants may take some psychological solace in downplaying the negative aspects of their impending ayahuasca experiences, it can leave them highly exposed to the mental, physical, and metaphysical shock of entering a 'supernatural wonderland'. Within itself, it appears that neither general life nor everyday altered states of consciousness are an experiential mirror for ayahuasca. This was particularly apparent when considering this sample's previous religious experiences, where the supernatural was limited to low-level imagination and faith. As such, it seems that the participants had entered the ayahuasca state not as experiential blank slates necessarily, but with little understanding of the challenges awaiting them in this otherworldly arena. Helping us understand more about this issue, Mary commented:

Ayahuasca tastes bad. And you can taste it for hours. I always want to vomit when I drink it. [Pause]. I always lie down afterwards, meditate, and wait for the hallucinations to kick in. I've seen elves, ghosts, aliens. Every type of magical creature. Watched my outside world transform into forests, oceans, and talked to people from different dimensions. This is only the beginning though, as when I get tired and close my eyes, a new world slowly materialises and pulls me inside. The detail still blows my mind. So real. It can be a rough ride entering another dimension. I've seen people kicking and screaming as their minds leave this world. Fevers are normal. And people cry all the time. [Pause]. It can be scary talking to deities and demons. Seeing magic. Reliving painful memories. We see what we fear the most. Nearly always vomit. I usually go to Heaven after Hell. The hardest thing is ayahuasca can't be stopped once it starts. It must be endured. There is no off button.

Such comments were common throughout this sample, highlighting the acute embodied tensions awaiting those who consume this otherworldly brew. While being immersed within the ayahuasca experience often remains physically and emotionally disconcerting, the greater challenge is learning to cope with divine and demonic visual content. As might be expected, such experiences have the potential to haunt individuals for the longer term, leaving many struggling to meaningfully move forward with their daily lives, and discern what is real, as Frank said:

Once you've tasted ayahuasca, you'll never be the same again. I'd never thought about what's real before, and ayahuasca made me. I mean it really made me. At first, I had no idea what to make of it all. This really screwed with my mind. All my old beliefs fell apart. I quickly lost any grip on what was real. [Pause]. My visions kept showing me that everything is supernatural. Everything is a spirit. This became a big problem in my everyday life. I stopped believing in cause and effect. I was more interested in seeking help from my church. I was struggling at work. Couldn't cope with anything. Sounds stupid, but I spent a month thinking my refrigerator was haunted. Didn't drink any milk for a whole month. People might laugh at what I just said, but ayahuasca had blown my worldview apart, and I was quickly losing my grip on reality and losing touch with everyone I'd ever known. I didn't want them to see me falling apart.

Critically, we come to see supernatural visions and hallucinations raising acute questions about whether such experiences are veridical, and what this might mean for everyday life, and the nature of reality itself. Furthermore, these experiences within neo-ayahuasca churches can leave individuals attempting to piece together complex philosophical, psychological, and religious sense without the scaffolds more often found as part of rich indigenous cultures. Critically, though, these participants were rarely alone in attempting to cosmologically separate supernatural fact from fiction and were typically guided into new doctrinal beliefs by more experienced church members, even if this was piecemeal and poorly theorised, as discussed in the following section.

### **4.3. Making sense of the supernatural**

As we might imagine, trying to understand the supernatural can be an arduous task, which can easily be compounded by a lack of previous consideration, unsystematised cultural beliefs, and a fear of social stigmatisation related to psychedelic consumption.

Yet, for those willing to embrace taboo, the challenge is how to plausibly explain otherworldly experiences and just as importantly, integrate perceived phantasmagorical perspectives into new working cosmologies suitable for this life and beyond. Explaining how this process of making supernatural sense began, Mark said:

Ayahuasca showed me a hidden supernatural universe. But what did that mean? Everyone in my church kept saying the supernatural was everywhere. Like ghosts and demons, and stuff. [Pause]. It was hard to believe at first. It was all just too big to get my head around. Too incomprehensible. So, yeah, the first few months here were hard. [Pause]. So, why did I stay? Come on man, you must be thinking I'd be mad to keep slurping this potion. Eh? Thing was that I saw my dead grandmother. She was as real as anyone I'd ever seen. My church told me to believe my own inner eyes. Accept that I'd seen the afterlife. But y'know, I kept thinking. Are these experiences real? I had a choice. Accept that I'd seen her and that ayahuasca shows the afterlife. That I could see her again. Or reject it all and try to go back to my old life. Admit I'd taken drugs. Put like that it was easy to believe. The church was always telling me I couldn't have faked this anyway. No drug could make something so intricate. T'be honest, everyone here found a reason to believe. For me, seeing my grandma gave me faith. So, I accepted everything else. Not easy to rewrite everything you've ever believed though.

Not surprisingly, the fundamental question for each participant quickly became: 'but are these experiences real?' Epistemologically, this was a thorny issue, as while ayahuasca continually catalyses supernatural hallucinations and visions, industrialised cultures tend to dismiss otherworldly psychoactive experiences as epistemically dubious, and in most cases, unreal. While this issue received a great deal of epistemological attention from all participants, conversations on this matter tended to be emotionally charged and revealed a cathartic desire for these otherworldly visual experiences to be authentic and not the result of pharmacological fantasies of mind. This was even more likely to be the case when a participant had visually encountered a deceased relative, friend, or pet and was keen to establish a more meaningful connection to the afterlife. Irrespective of the truth of perceptual ayahuasca experiences, supernatural beliefs were usually aided by the claim that drugs cannot produce highly detailed in-depth visual knowledge, and as such, these phenomena should be considered real. While this approach helped the participants avoid self-stigmatisation related to drug use, it necessitated covert consumption away

from their extant social relationships. This being said, this tactic opened the door for these participants to explore new forms of doctrinal knowledge within their churches, and rewrite long-held beliefs, outside of criticism, as Stephen said:

My church is supporting my transition to a new spiritual life. It's amazing. They have given me everything I ever wanted. [Pause]. Better than the churches I used to go to. [Pause]. Global religions talk about the supernatural, but they've never seen it. Can't understand it. In my opinion, most religions are fake. They go to church, mutter some prayers, and are done for the week. I purify my soul with ayahuasca. My eyes are open now. I realised that everything is actually a step towards Heaven or Hell. [Pause]. I'm on a mission to save my soul. There is no place for the atom in my world. All these things are illusions. Only what I see in ayahuasca is real. [Pause]. Ayahuasca is a pair of glasses to see everything properly. The truth. The world can keep its lies. I have ayahuasca. [Pause]. The thing is, when ayahuasca wears off I can't see evil properly anymore. I become blind to the world, and this is dangerous. Life outside of church is dangerous.

With these churches sitting outside of traditional psychoactive and indigenous knowledge, it was unsurprising that their doctrinal teachings often lacked the metaphysical richness and nuance of more established ayahuasca cultures. As such, these churches and their new congregants often drew on popular quasi-religious themes. For example, instead of God purifying the soul and being the eschatological route to salvation, these aspects were simply attributed to consuming ayahuasca, which was positioned as a perceptual means to differentiate between good and evil. We thus come to see simple sense being preferred and sidestepping the need for more robust in-depth theorisation. However, with the effects of ayahuasca quickly waning after consumption, the participants were often left feeling morally and metaphysically myopic outside of their churches and highly exposed to malevolent forces in their daily lives. Against this binary backdrop of good and evil, the challenge became how-to live-in a less than perfect world. Commenting on this, Michelle argued:

Once I started to accept my ayahuasca visions are real, I knew my life had to change. [Pause]. Let me tell you, it is an odd thing to change everything in your life. I kept thinking, how should I live? Sounds like an odd thing to say. I mean, I'm an adult, so how could I not know? But things weren't that simple. Let me explain. I never knew that even the smallest things would become difficult. Like, where to shop?

Who to drink coffee with? Could I date who I wanted? Etcetera. [Pause]. My church helped me a lot with this. They have a lot of experience with new members. And they are very strict. [Pause]. They need to be. [Pause]. The church has a long list of things I can't do. In fact, nobody can do them. It is to keep us safe from evil. Anyone not in our church puts me at risk. The church doesn't like me mixing with anyone unclean who might hurt me spiritually. This could ruin my future ayahuasca sessions. Send me to Hell when I should be in Heaven. Hell in visions. Hell through eternity. [Pause]. Hmm, so, I left my old life behind. I don't really see many of my old friends or family anymore. It stops me being tainted, and stops my new beliefs being challenged. Keeps me safe. On the spiritual straight and narrow as they say. On the side of good, fighting darkness. [Pause]. All I can say is that it was a lot to give up. But I gained a future in Heaven. A long-lasting relationship with everyone I'd lost. And the ability to live in truth. I think I won to be honest with you. Although nobody I used to know believes this. They think I've become a recluse.

Simply speaking, these churches are strict social regulators, often prohibiting non-church relationships and activities, and limiting social life to what happens in church. While this act was frequently framed as protecting the spiritual wellbeing of congregants, it also limited the ability of these individuals to encounter contradictory views of reality. From a cognitive perspective, it seems reasonable to suggest that mitigating complex sense might alleviate already overburdened cognition, allowing these new consumers to put more resource to adapting to this new psychoactive process, albeit at the expense of broader socio-cultural experiences. Reflecting on why the participants agreed to this level of regulation, we must remember that ayahuasca not only leaves individuals in a state of metaphysical and psychological discombobulation, but also highly suggestible, and yearning for coherence. Furthermore, it was clear that these participants were not only afraid of losing visual access to the supernatural, but the potential of an eternity in paradise, which was so frequently promised by their churches. Although such aspects might go some way to account for the participants embracing a more isolated social life, it is worth speculating on the sustainability of these beliefs, and the degree to which the mundane world might undermine the longer-term acceptance or rejection of these otherworldly doctrines.

## 5. Discussion and Conclusions

Even though humanity has spent thousands of years exploring altered states of consciousness and ruminating on the possible existence of otherworldly phenomena (Stewart, Gapenne and Di Paolo, 2014), it seems fair to say that the psychoactive ‘keys’ to unlock esoteric knowledge have been unevenly distributed, and typically limited to indigenous peoples (Shanon, 2010). While psychoactive plants and potions continue to seep into the industrialised West, we are a long way from a renaissance, which is particularly noticeable when we consider how psychoactives are metaphysically juxtaposed as: (1) mundane medical therapeutics, (2) a lens to see the supernatural, and (3) illicit products, harmful to the mind, body, and soul (Frood, 2015). Against this rather curious and confusing cultural backdrop, it is hardly surprising that there is still much to understand about how psychoactives ‘lure’ individuals into an otherworldly wonderland, and just as importantly, how new congregants navigate cultural taboos, and negotiate novel metaphysical perspectives against extant social norms (Siff, 2015; Tupper, 2008). With ayahuasca being one of the most popular psychoactives amongst those seeking personal transformation and immersive visionary experiences (Gandy *et al.*, 2022), this study asked: how do new, non-expert congregants negotiate supernatural ‘fact’ and ‘fiction’ within non-traditional ayahuasca churches? Answering this question is likely to become an increasingly important issue as ayahuasca consumption spreads around the globe and is continually reimagined both inside and outside of indigenous knowledge.

Looking at this sample’s motivational journey towards consuming ayahuasca, it was clear that all participants had initially held negative views about psychoactives, and consequently, shown little previous interest in imbibing them. Within itself, it is relatively rare for individuals to embrace psychoactives, and for the few who do, it is usually driven by acute personal needs not easily met within their everyday repertoire of socio-cultural resources (Stepp and Moerman, 2001). This was certainly the case for this sample, who claimed to have hit an impasse in their lives and were keen for ayahuasca to help them reclaim a more meaningful way of living (Gonzalez *et al.*, 2017). While the pursuit of ayahuasca was often begrudging to start with, it was greatly aided by spectacular church marketing claims that positioned this unusual brew as an indigenous panacea and magic potion. Critically, although the participants could have travelled to South America for more authentic ayahuasca experiences, the ease of access to European venues, and

lower costs were strong motivating factors for pursuing local forms of psychoactive consumption, which appears to be a growing trend.

Reminding ourselves that most mundane everyday experiences seem to have little in common with psychoactive visions and hallucinations, it was apparent that the participants were ill-prepared for the physical, psychological, and metaphysical turbulence generated from these otherworldly lands (Shanon, 2010). At the heart of this issue is ayahuasca's catalytic potential to overturn notions of who we think we are, and just as importantly, reorientate how we believe the world works. Consequently, it is not uncommon for individuals to feel lost in an unknowable supernatural universe, where the natural laws are increasingly inconsequential. Although such otherworldly experiences can be unnerving and unpleasant, ayahuasca can also be enthralling, particularly when showing heavenly reveries and the possibility of re-establishing relationships with deceased relatives, friends, and pets. While ayahuasca is not pharmacologically addictive (da Motta *et al.*, 2018), we should not underestimate the emotional draw of certain types of visions and hallucinations, or that individuals are often left in highly suggestible states (Bouso and Riba, 2014). Having said this, the challenge for whether to keep consuming this brew can be reduced, in part, to epistemology, i.e., are these supernatural experiences noumena? (McKenna, Luna and Towers, 1995). Not surprisingly, this issue received in-depth attention from all participants, with the metaphysical complexity of this issue seeming to be beyond the participants. As such, these experiences were deemed true, due to personal preference, and a growing desire for the otherworldly to be real. Even though this was a dubious epistemological stance, it was well supported by these churches, who were committed to promoting the veridical nature of ayahuasca experiences, and in so doing, increasing the number of congregants accessing the otherworldly.

Finally, while taking a religious view towards ayahuasca visions and hallucinations unlocked a multitude of spiritual, salvific, and eschatological possibilities for the participants, the challenge quickly became how to engage in everyday life? As might be expected, this was no small undertaking, and required an ongoing negotiation of emerging supernatural beliefs against extant secular-material knowledge, with the latter continually losing ground. Although making sense of the supernatural tended to be a fraught act, no participant tackled this issue alone, as all churches were keen to guide

and mandate how their new congregants made sense of ayahuasca, and just as importantly, reality itself. Practically, this typically involved church regulation of extant congregant relationships and prohibition of worldly information conflicting with their phantasmagorical doctrines. Even though this tactic had the potential to mitigate social stigmatisation from competing social views of ayahuasca, it is worth reflecting on how sustainable these churches really are, when they enforce a life of semi-isolation for their congregations. Just as importantly, how these stifled doctrines may generate philosophical and psychological tensions from congregants looking for deeper explanations of how ayahuasca can help them understand their place within the cosmos. How we can better understand such aspects is addressed in the following section.

### **5.1. Future Work**

As this study progressed, it was apparent that the participants were developing a greater interest in understanding their metaphysical journeys. As such, and with these ayahuasca churches also welcoming further research, it is our intention to build on this study's findings and address salient research gaps. Consequently, the first area to be examined is the experience of new congregants who reject ayahuasca, including what precipitated this decision-making, and how they integrated back into their day-to-day lives. With almost no attention having been paid to this issue previously, there is much to learn about 'failed' ayahuasca consumption, and the longer metaphysical consequences (Dean, 2019).

The second area to be explored is the doctrinal sustainability of these churches, particularly against the backdrop of mandating congregants abandon many of their former beliefs, behaviours, and relationships, while embracing a state of semi-socio-cultural isolation. Furthermore, we will also seek to better understand the quasi-Manichean foundations of these doctrines, and to what degree external religions, in any, led to the view that the universe is a binary of good vs. evil.

The third, and final area to be studied is how the changing medical landscape of psychoactives might influence current church recruitment strategies and the metaphysical nature of their otherworldly doctrines. This is particularly salient when we consider that ayahuasca is undergoing extensive medical trials and is likely to be used as a regulated therapeutic in the imminent future (da Motta *et al.*, 2018).

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