



# 2014 AVA Declaration Ayahuasca in the Globalized World

In September 2014, approximately 650 people from over 60 different countries attended the World Ayahuasca Conference in Santa Eulària des Riu, Ibiza, Spain. At this conference, a group of 40 scientific, legal, and public policy experts met to discuss how ayahuasca drinking practices can be better understood, respected and protected as international interest in the brew spreads in the 21st century. The conference formed an Expert Committee for the Regularization of Psychoactive Ethnobotanicals. The following is the consensus declaration of this group: a call for governments to work towards creating a constructive legal and human rights-based foundation for ayahuasca drinking.

Every human being should be free to choose ways and tools that facilitate healthy personal growth and spiritual development, to overcome mental or physical illness, and to nurture individual flourishing, social bonding and family life, as well as to cultivate spiritual meaning. Moreover, at a time when humans collectively are living on the precipice of social, environmental and economic crisis, it is vital that intercultural dialogue and holistic policies promote a sustainable existence for our species, embracing our diversity in a world with interconnected societies, in harmony with the planet and its other inhabitants. It is intrinsic to the evolution of humankind to seek new methods, and to improve those we have at hand, to effectively reach these goals.

Unfortunately, this seems not to apply when it comes to certain tools of ethnobotanical nature utilized for centuries by indigenous and pre-modern societies in ceremonial practices, passed on orally from generation to generation. One of these, ayahuasca (a brew made from the stems of the *Banisteriopsis caapi* vine and the leaves of the *Psychotria viridis* bush), has played a quintessential role in the spiritual, medical and cultural traditions of peoples who have inhabited the upper part of the Amazon basin. In the past few

decades, various traditions and new modalities of ayahuasca drinking have been taken up beyond the frontiers of the Amazon, embarking on a new multi-cultural symbiosis.

For centuries, industrialized societies have been in general repressive and intolerant towards plants with psychoactive properties, mistakenly interpreting their use as diabolical, destructive and addictive. However, recent medical and social scientific evidence shows that this long-standing cultural prejudice is misguided, and plants such as ayahuasca are gaining increased recognition for their potential role in psychotherapeutic processes, spiritual growth, and the improvement of interpersonal relations.<sup>1</sup>

The various emerging practices of ayahuasca drinking resist traditional conceptualizations and categorizations of illegal drug “abuse” as defined by the dominant international drug control regime. Equating the ritualistic, religious and therapeutic uses of ayahuasca to the problematic uses of controlled drugs like opiates, cocaine or methamphetamine—or treating people who lead ayahuasca ceremonies as “drug traffickers” involved in illegal markets—is misinformed, not based on evidence, and contributes to confusion about the human-rights based legitimacy of these practices.<sup>2</sup>

Moreover, scientific evidence shows that ayahuasca does not lead to chronic and problematic patterns of use (i.e., addiction), that its use does not generate pharmacological tolerance and that it has an acceptable physiological and psychological safety profile in controlled settings.<sup>3</sup> Also, its emetic effects—traditionally considered a crucial aspect of its spiritual and healing properties—along with the often profound introspective experience it induces, usually have positive health and behavioural outcomes among regular drinkers.

For a significant and rapidly increasing population in various parts of the world, drinking ayahuasca is the way people choose to promote spiritual and personal development, overcome suffering and deepen their relationship with themselves, their families, their environment and planet Earth. However, to many drug control bodies, such as the International Narcotics Control Board, as well as law enforcement officers, legal prosecutors and judiciaries of individual

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<sup>1</sup> Labate, B. C., & Cavnar, C. (Eds.). (2014). *The therapeutic use of ayahuasca*. Heidelberg: Springer.

<sup>2</sup> Tupper, K. W., & Labate, B. C. (2012). Plants, psychoactive substances and the International Narcotics Control Board: The control of nature and the nature of control. *Human Rights and Drugs*, 2 (1), 17-28.

<sup>3</sup> Bouso, J.C., dos Santos, R., Grob, Ch., da Siveira, D., McKenna D.J., de Araujo, D., Doering-Silveira, E., Riba, J. & Barbosa, P. (2013). *Technical Report about Ayahuasca*, Barcelona: ICEERS Foundation.

countries, ayahuasca drinking is often mistakenly regarded as a new way to get high, an inauthentic spiritual practice, a destructive drug addiction, and a threat to public health and moral order that requires repressive measures.

In 2010, the INCB affirmed that "no plant or concoction containing DMT, including ayahuasca, is currently under international control". However, the Board added that "some countries may have decided to apply control measures to the use and trade of ayahuasca, due to the *serious health risks* that the use of this preparation carries."<sup>4</sup> Coinciding with the INCB raising political alarm regarding ayahuasca and other psychoactive plant materials in their 2010 and 2012 Annual Reports,<sup>5</sup> and following a trend started in the mid-1990s, a series of arrests across Europe and abroad were conducted to signal intolerance for ceremonial ayahuasca drinking practices. It seems realistic to state that national (in individual states) or even international prohibition of ayahuasca is now a distinct future possibility.<sup>6</sup>

We have followed closely the legal and court cases pertaining to many of the different ayahuasca drinking communities and have witnessed how tragic and damaging this oppression can be to those involved.

Therefore, *we ask* governments, policy-makers, legal prosecutors, judges and law enforcement officials to take the traditional and cultural value of ayahuasca drinking practices worldwide into account, basing their policies and decisions on the scientific evidence and the human rights described above. *We ask* for an end to the legal prosecution of these practices and instead for governments to collaborate with representatives of the communities of people who drink ayahuasca, facilitating efficient self-regulation models, health promotion and harm reduction, and public educational initiatives. *We ask* judges of ayahuasca-related court cases to take the INCB statement on the international legal status of ayahuasca into account: *In this case DMT in the ayahuasca brew occurs in its natural form, and thus is not under international control according to the official interpretation of the 1971 Convention on Psychotropic Substances.*<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Letter sent to ICEERS by the INCB in 2010, available at [http://iceers.org/Documents\\_ICEERS\\_site/Letters/INCB/INCB\\_Response\\_Inquiry\\_ICEERS\\_Ayahuasca\\_2010.pdf](http://iceers.org/Documents_ICEERS_site/Letters/INCB/INCB_Response_Inquiry_ICEERS_Ayahuasca_2010.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> INCB Annual Report 2010, par. 286; INCB Annual Report 2012, par. 329-330.

<sup>6</sup> Labate, B. C., & Jungaberle, H. (Eds.). (2011). *The internationalization of ayahuasca*. Zürich: Lit Verlag.

<sup>7</sup> Lande, A. (1976). *Commentary on the Convention on Psychotropic Substances, done at Vienna on 21 February 1971*. New York: United Nations.

It is equally important to note that the potential benefits of plants such as ayahuasca are tempered by the potential for harm, if they are not used responsibly. *We remind* people who drink ayahuasca, and especially those who lead ayahuasca ceremonies, that they assume a responsibility to do so with the knowledge, intention, and duty of care to maximize benefits and minimize risks. Unethical behavior and criminal incidents cannot be tolerated and should always be reported, so that collectively the ayahuasca drinking community can continue to facilitate self-regulation and preserve the integrity of their practices.

In conclusion, and following a previous statement by academic experts,<sup>8</sup> we *urge* regulatory authorities to demonstrate tolerance based on the fundamental and universal rights to freedom of religion and thought<sup>9</sup>, together with the freedom to choose ways and tools to facilitate physical and psychological well-being, and thus to grant ayahuasca drinking communities the necessary degree of legal freedom and respectful engagement for them to continue evolving into safe and responsible contributors to today's multicultural and globalizing society.



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[www.aya2014.com/en/aya2014-declaration](http://www.aya2014.com/en/aya2014-declaration)

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<sup>8</sup> Anderson, B. T., Labate, B. C., Meyer, M., Tupper, K. W., Barbosa, P. C. R., Grob, C. S., *et al.* (2012). Statement on ayahuasca. *International Journal of Drug Policy*, 23 (3), 173-175.

<sup>9</sup> These rights are recognized in broadly ratified international instruments, such as the 1948 UNGA Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Art. 18), the 1950 European Convention on Human Rights (Art. 9) and the 1969 American Convention on Human Rights (Art. 12).

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