



Sacred Plants and Mental Health in Latin America

Oscar Espin*

* Social Anthropologist / Belongs to the Master's program in Public Mental Health at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México.

EN | Abstract:

Sacred plants have a number of phenomena that revolve around their ritual and medicinal use, as well as being seen as carrying a bond with the sphere of the sacred. México is the country that has the greatest diversity of sacred plants in the Americas because its indigenous groups have a magical-religious relationship with them.

In the beginning of the study of sacred plants, psilocybin, mescaline and ergotamine began to be classified as classical psychedelics, this categorization was of great help to psychiatry and neuroscience in the 1950s and 1960s.

ES | Abstract:

Las plantas sagradas tienen una serie de fenómenos que giran en torno a su uso ritual y medicinal, además de ser vistas como portadoras de un lazo con la esfera de lo sagrado. México es el país que tiene la diversidad más grande de plantas sagradas de las Américas debido a que sus grupos indígenas tienen una relación mágico – religiosa con ellas.

En el inicio del estudio de las plantas sagradas, se comenzaron a clasificar como psicodélicos clásicos a la psilocibina, mezcalina y ergotamina, esta categorización fue de gran ayuda para la psiquiatría y neurociencia en las décadas de 1950 y 1960.

Keywords: *Psychedelics, Mental Health, Human Rights*

Palabras Clave: *Psicodélicos, Salud Mental, Derechos Humanos*

I. SACRED PLANTS OR PSYCHEDELICS?

All around the world, there are a number of plants, mushrooms, and animals which contain psychoactive substances which interfere with the human perception of sight, sound, and smell. These can be accompanied by emotional statuses that lead the user to the sensation of enlightenment or to a transcendental experience.

The majority of this type of plants have been termed as 'hallucinogenic', or as 'psychedelic' – mind-revealing substances – or as 'entheogen' – which reveals the God within you (Samorini, 2001). The American continent is the part of the world where the largest number of sacred plants that are linked to the development of the ancient tribes may be found.



Within the continent, Mexico is the country where the highest diversity of sacred plants is found owing to the magic connection the indigenous groups have developed with them. This is the example of the 'peyote' and the Wixarikas tribe in the northern part of the country.

Likewise, it is known that as many as 24 species of hallucinogenic mushrooms that the Aztec tribe named 'Teonanacatl' are found in Southern Mexico alone. The use of *Salvia divinorum* to predict the future in the Oaxaca region is also documented, as well as the 'Ololiuhqui' and some types of *Datura* such as the 'toloache' or the 'floripondio' (Hofmann and Schultes, 1983).

After Mexico, the area with the highest diversity of psychedelic flora which has been traditionally linked to spiritual or magical rituals is South America. In Bolivia and Peru, for example, the San Pedro cactus is used as the base of a drink called Cimora. This drink is utilized in ceremonies where the person drinking it has religious hallucinations. Likewise, the coca leaves are used for rituals that connect man with nature through ceremonial trances or a cure for altitude sickness.

Ayahuasca, Yage or Caapi is the most important holy plant in South America. It has different names across the regions, and it is mostly found in tropical and sub-tropical areas of the Amazon – Peru, Ecuador, Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia and Venezuela. After mixing the two vines – ayahuasca and chacruna – these are taken in a ceremonial context, accompanied by a spiritual guide. The consumption of Ayahuasca for the indigenous groups in the Amazon is seen as a "means for freeing one's soul from its body limits, in order for it to freely travel in the outer space and to return to it at will [...] the freed soul shifts from the daily reality to a wonderful world, which is perceived as real, from where it is possible to communicate with the ancestors" (Hofmann and Schultes, 1983).

The sacred plants are characterized by a number of phenomena related to their ritual and medicinal uses. These are seen as the connectors to the sacred world, through altered states of consciousness and through the guidance of a 'shaman', healer, or medium, or on one's own.

The sacredness of things is manifested through acts, situations, and places that are charged with it, where the sacred is given total attention during the religious experience. The follower's belief is activated through 'hierophanies' displaying meaningful religious objects and situations (Eliade, 1998).



II. HOW ARE SACRED PLANTS RELATED TO MENTAL HEALTH?

The World Health Organisation (WHO) defines mental health as “a state of well-being in which every individual realizes his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to her or his community” (WHO, 2004).

Mental health can be promoted by involving the community and the private sector in tandem, as well as via the collaboration with research institutions, mental health experts, decision and policy-makers, as well as people suffering from any mental ailments or their relatives (WHO, 2013).

The promotion of mental health, well-being, and the prevention and treatment of drug abuse make up an important part of the Sustainable Development Agenda 2030, adopted by the UN General Assembly (UN, 2015).

In South America, the mental health public policies are still being developed as not in all countries mental disorders are fully covered by the national health system in place. Moreover, in all South American countries, there are rules and regulations restricting the cultivation, transportation, and consumption of substances including the so-called sacred plants: peyote, ayahuasca, psychedelic mushrooms, coca leaves, San Pedro cactus, salvia divinorum, and more.

The prohibition of drugs has since its origin been implemented as a by-product of colonialism, without giving any importance to the existing cultural beliefs and the related traditional uses of sacred plants. For this reason, the indigenous tribes have been negatively affected at a political, economic, and social level.

The UN Executive Board has recently taken a position on decriminalizing the possession and use of drugs in order to bring about a change in the rules, politics, and practices which harm public health and human rights (UN, 2019).

The proposed new mental health paradigm accepts the cultural rights and uses of the indigenous tribes and ethnic minorities who traditionally consume these substances. This is in favor of the utilization of the sacred plants by these groups, whose ritual heritage, religious wisdom, and medicinal knowledge are today being negatively affected.

Mental health cannot be obtained if a patient is being considered a criminal and is discriminated for the cultural use of the sacred plants.



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AUTOR

First Author – Oscar Espin, Social Anthropologist / Belongs to the Master's program in Public Mental Health at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, <https://www.facebook.com/ozuka.ru.7>

Requests to authors – Oscar Espin, <https://www.facebook.com/ozuka.ru.7>.



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