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Ayahuasca Calling: Sacredness and the Emergence of Shamanic Vocations in Denmark and Peru

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ABSTRACT

This article addresses the sacredness of Ayahuasca from the perspective of the global shamanic vocation. If encounters with Ayahuasca are said to revitalize forms of sacredness in contemporary societies, this is perhaps clearest in cases where individuals understand themselves to be called to lead ceremonies. Recognizing the global scale of Ayahuasca shamanism, we compare facilitators of ceremonies in two societies to discern differences and similarities in how Ayahuasca vocations exist in differently modernized societies: Peru, a predominantly Catholic society with a substantial
Indigenous Amazonian population and an active Ayahuasca shamanism tourism sector, and Denmark, a secular society in Northern Europe, where Ayahuasca is illegal. Building on recent reappraisals of Weber’s reflection on vocation and Durkheim’s theory of the sacred, we argue that being called by Ayahuasca to follow shamanic vocations in contemporary societies leads to tensions around the need to both justify and resist the rationalization of Ayahuasca.

**Keywords:** Ayahuasca, shamanism, sacredness, secularism, vocation

Ayahuasca is a psychotropic brew composed of two plants, most often bark from a Banisteriopsis liana (which is often known metonymically as Ayahuasca) and leaves from Psychotria viridis (also known as Chakruna), which originate in the Upper Amazon. It is often associated with Indigenous groups and their shamanic practices, though it is also used by Hispano-descendants for its cicatrizing properties. In fact, it is far less widespread in Amazonian shamanism than other plants such as tobacco. Although archeological evidence points to the combined use of these two plants already around a thousand years ago in the Andean region along with coca leaves (Miller et al. 2019), historical evidence also points to a more recent spread to the Upper Amazon, first through Franciscan missions and urban centers in the 17th and 18th centuries and only later to forest populations during the rubber boom (Gow 1994, 108-109). In other words, the combined use of these two plants as hallucinogenic might have been discovered, forgotten, and re-discovered in different places and times, and certainly has already traveled far beyond its primary ecological area for a long time. Ayahuasca use is thus historical and has served different purposes over time, most often for healing and to establish relations with nonhumans. In this article, we address how Ayahuasca today may be considered “sacred” at a global scale from the perspective of the emergence of shamanic vocations.

Since the 1970s, Ayahuasca both as a substance and as shamanic practice has become the object of intense attention from non-Indigenous People, ranging from tourism to medicinal experimentation (Homan 2018; Fotiou 2014, 2016; Labate and Cavnar 2014). As a result, it has opened up many economic opportunities for locals and foreigners, as other plants, such as rubber, timber, or vanilla have done in the past (Peluso 2016). Unlike these other booms, it more directly involves the expertise of Indigenous shamans and therefore brings tourists to the region to a larger extent than it exports the plants abroad (Fotiou 2016). Nevertheless, the continuous western or non-Indigenous interest in Ayahuasca and shamanic practices more generally (Rodd 2018; Fotiou 2016; Lewis 2008) has also meant that Ayahuasca has become increasingly available, particularly in North America, Australia, and...
Europe, either in medicalized settings (Talin and Sanabria 2017), or in ceremonies guided by traveling Indigenous shamans or by non-Indigenous People—even as it often remains illegal and raises questions of cultural legitimacy (Povinelli 2006, 147-151; Fotiou 2016). A large part of Ayahuasca scholarship has focused on drug tourism and entrepreneurship as well as the socio-cultural and economic effects of the globalization of Ayahuasca. Less research has looked at the professionalization of Ayahuasca use and how it emerges in these different cultural and geographical settings, far away from its origin.

In this article, we discuss individuals in locales as different as contemporary Denmark and Peru, who, as a result of “sacred” experiences with Ayahuasca, felt called to become facilitators of ceremonies and/or become shamans themselves. In the following section, we set up a theoretical framework, which helps us account for experiences of the sacred and the subsequent recognition of a vocation. We then present responses to or ways of practicing the calling of Ayahuasca in a comparative perspective, drawing on similarities and differences between a Danish and a Peruvian setting.

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES ON SACREDNESS AND VOCATION

Our understanding of Ayahuasca as a sacred plant follows Hans Joas’s re-articulation of the concept of the sacred and its power from the history of sociology (Joas 2021). Joas anchors his concept of the sacred in a pragmatic account of human action and selfhood, whereby actions are creative responses of human beings to their environment and the problems it throws at them, including interactions with other human beings. Out of social interactions emerges a self, a person’s more or less stable and coherent relation to themselves that synthesizes relations with various others. This sense of self changes over time but is most profoundly affected by experiences of self-transcendence, where its symbolic boundaries are radically challenged, and during which the person is fundamentally passive. In other words, during self-transcendence, the individual experiences stirring forces and emotional, pre-reflexive forms of certainty that fall under the analytical term of “sacredness.” This concept of the sacred is therefore analytical and holds wherever such an experience of self-transcendence occurs, even where the term is refused by interlocutors because of its association with specific religious institutions. This passive experience of the sacred then demands some minimal action, through interpretation by the individual and the collectives to which he belongs in ways that may be rife with tensions. Out of this interpreted experience of the sacred, norms and ideals emerge that come to transform
the self and society in ways that may reinforce or contradict other sources of power (Joas 2021, 237-247).

Our claim in this article is that Ayahuasca induces such experiences of the sacred in ways that, at times, become interpreted as a vocation. Our objective in this article is to compare the social effects of such a calling as experienced by different individuals in different contexts in order to clarify what it means for Ayahuasca to be experienced as sacred in contemporary societies. Joas’s re-articulation of the concept of the sacred serves, among other things, to provide a way to better understand religious phenomena in modernity, beyond narratives that would reduce modernity to a uniform de-sacralization. As he puts it,

"The idea of linear processes of secularization or disenchantment must be superseded by analysis of the interplay between sacralization and de-sacralization, of the migration of the sacred; the notions of “functional differentiation” and “rationalization” must be superseded by analysis of processes of interplay between institutionalized logics of action, processes with no fixed outcome. At the same time, the dynamic of sacralization repeatedly ensures that radical shifts occur and new institutions emerge” (Joas 2021, 232).

We focus on vocation both as a key category in the Weberian narrative of secularization, which Joas wants to overcome, and because of its key role in the constitution of new institutions. In order to better showcase the form that Ayahuasca vocations take, we compare similar profiles (middle-aged, middle-class men) in two very different societies: Peru and Denmark. These two societies are particularly interesting in this context for two reasons. First, they represent different forms of modernity, one that more characteristically follows the Weberian paradigm (secularized Lutheran Denmark) and the other, a very religious, Catholic one (Peru). Moreover, they are differently positioned with regards to Ayahuasca, which is native both as a plant and as religious and medicinal practice to Peru but is frowned upon both legally and socially in Denmark.

For Max Weber, the secularization of religious vocation played a crucial role in the transition to capitalism. In its broadest terms, vocation designates for Weber "an aspect of social being in which an orientation to particular tasks and goals is formative not only of an individual career, but, in providing such direction, also of the process of self-formation" (Barbalet 2008, 48). Whereas vocation was, for example for Hebrew prophets, a passionate subordination of private motives to the cause of God (Barbalet 2008, 71), and later on in Catholicism would lead the called to retreat from worldly affairs into monasteries, it transformed radically during the Reformation. For Luther and
Calvin, God’s calling could be experienced in worldly occupations too (ibid., 53). Vocation could then become a motor for the rationalization of one’s existence in the world, that is, the subordination of one’s private interests and inclinations, notably one’s emotions, to a given purpose (ibid., 50). Consequently, vocation would come to characterize the capitalist entrepreneur as well as the scientist or the politician, even as parts of these vocations have as aims a further disenchantment and secularization of the world (ibid., 63).

The secularization of vocation in capitalism raises a number of difficulties, not least for non-secular vocations such as the ones we examine in this article. Although historically, vocations have led to a capitalist culture of work and to the rationalization of professional life, these forms of institutionalization may well appear to the person who experienced a calling as betrayals of the vocation or fetters on their ability to follow through with their vocation (Weigert and Blasi 2007, 10). Vocation may then express itself either as a modality of a given profession, a call to work in a particularly dutiful or ethical manner, or as something that should only take place outside of a work context, an avocation (ibid., 21-22). Moreover, this calling may put the called at odds with the rest of society and demand of her not only a form of asceticism but also involvement in acts of civil disobedience, attempts to transform society, and to put herself at risk in various ways (ibid., 24). Because the vocation may in these ways endanger the identity of the called, it may give rise to extensive soul-searching and attempts at discernment, particularly to ascertain the reality and authenticity of the call—and of the identity of the caller (ibid., 30). In that context, “even not responding takes on a significance; not acting may be as meaningful as any course of action” (ibid., 27), with such meanings and significance changing over time as one follows through (or not) with the calling, and, in doing so, comes to understand it in different ways.

Let us then clarify our use of various terms. We follow Joas in using the word “sacred” as an analytical term to refer to an experience of self-transcendence, whether or not our interlocutors would call such experiences sacred. The terms “secularization” and “disenchantment” are also analytical terms that for us refer specifically to the decreasing influence of Christian institutions and theology as authoritative in people’s lives in a given society and their replacement with rational-legal forms of legitimacy. The question of whether non-Christian societies also do experience sacralization is a complex one that we do not address here, although we hope this article will raise comparative questions concerning the ways Indigenous Amazonian people relate to Ayahuasca and their participation in the professionalization of Ayahuasca use. Sacredness, for Joas, does not require the existence of a religious framework and manifests also as, for example, the respect for the sacredness of human life expressed in human rights. Following Barbalet, we consider
that in more or less secularized Christian-majority capitalist societies such as
Denmark and Peru, the sacred can be experienced as a “calling” to devote
oneself to it, which, if accepted, can lead one to take it on as a “vocation” or
an “avocation.” This results in an effort to regulate and rationalize one’s life
in order to live up to the standards of this vocation, and in some cases to the
desire for a regulation of those standards through professionalization. It
could, here too, be a largely secular vocation such as that of medicine.

We are concerned here with callings experienced in relation to the inges-
tion of Ayahuasca, which lead individuals to become what they themselves
call “curanderos,” “shamans,” or “facilitators.” Importantly, those who refuse
to call themselves “shaman” do so out of a specific understanding of that
word. The term “shaman” is not native to Amazonia but originates as a pro-
duct of interactions between the Russians and Indigenous People in Siberia
(Hutton 2001), and becomes used to describe the practices of Indigenous
Amazonian people through the efforts of anthropologists and scholars of reli-
gion such as Mircea Eliade (Kehoe 2000). It then became a more common
term through the popularization of these writings and in the development
of a shamanic tourism industry. Thus, our interlocutors who call themselves
“shamans” would most likely be described by others as “neo-shamans” be-
cause of a lack of perceived authenticity. Our Danish interlocutors often
prefer the term “facilitator” because of a felt distance with regards to “real
shamanism. As we will argue, the terms result from these interlocutors’ understandings of their relation to Ayahuasca, to their national context, and
of their location in the global Ayahuasca market. In other words, “shaman” is
a “word in motion” (Gluck and Tsing 2009), constituted by processes of
globalization and constitutive of a certain kind of world. In that sense, the
terms of our comparison are not really independent from each other but
already do compare themselves as they decide, or not, to call their vocation
“shamanism.”

The re-sacralization of vocationality in Ayahuasca use that we examine in
this article lends itself to a number of paradoxes and ambivalences. On the
one hand, the calling appears to run against the demands for rationality and
rationalization of capitalist societies. As a result, those who are called resist
attempts to present Ayahuasca as a merely medical substance and the sanita-
tion and commercialization that goes along with it. At the same time, the
demands of the plant also lead them towards professionalization, whether as
shamans or in the daily jobs that enable them to be non-commercial sha-
mans. They may feel the need to advocate for the creation of more or less
official standards of qualification and practice to promote safer and more
authentic access to the plant, as well as to curb their own desires and inter-
ests, in order to be worthier of the plant. Still, the intense personal relation
with the plant may continue to lead to a distaste for institutionalization and
professional standards. Thus, these dilemmas often continue to be acutely felt by shamans or facilitators even as they tend to side with one or the other. In that sense, the “Ayahuasquero” vocation reactivates within capitalism a sense of the sacred that refuses to be routinized.

AYAHUASCA FACILITATION IN DENMARK

Danish society is a largely secular society with a paradoxically prominent presence of the Church of Denmark in everyday life. Although almost 80% of the population are officially members of the Church, the belief in God as well as weekly church attendance are among the lowest in the world (36% and 3%, respectively; see Zuckerman 2020, 4), making Denmark (and Scandinavia more broadly) an exemplary case of secularism. The prominence of the Church in everyday life is not so much religious as cultural, as the Church is endowed by the Danish state with responsibilities concerning the life cycle (such as registering births, celebrating weddings, and carrying out burials) and recognized by most Danes as playing an important part in preserving Danish culture and communities (Nielsen 2014, 265). Generally, Danes believe that religion is and should remain a private matter and, even there, that it cannot provide guidelines for morality, family life, or social problems (Nielsen 2014, 269).

In contrast to the highly secular, very visible form of secularized State Protestantism, offered by the Church of Denmark, Ayahuasca ceremonies, in a Danish context, are “underground” and therefore hidden, due to the illegality of importing, using, or commercializing Ayahuasca in Denmark. Despite this, there are several relatively established places in Denmark where Ayahuasca ceremonies are facilitated regularly. Most of the retreats or ceremonies are advertised through closed internet fora or social media and are thus somewhat removed from mainstream society, as they primarily circulate in trusted networks. However, a few of the places do have a homepage and are relatively open about their endeavors to potential clients outside psychedelic communities.

Ayahuasca and other psychedelic ceremonies primarily take place in rural surroundings far from the major cities in Denmark. A few of the facilitators frequently work between city and rural settings but the majority have settled more or less permanently in rural or small-town surroundings. However, most of the facilitators have grown up in or near a city and often have their networks there. To call Ayahuasca “sacred” (hellig in Danish) is not so common, as the official sacred is so closely connected to the Church of Denmark—yet, as we shall see, the experiences described correspond to the concept
outlined by Joas. Instead, most facilitators and participants alike use the more general term “spiritual.”

The Danish data in this article come from three years of ethnographic fieldwork, between 2017 and 2020, in and around several psychedelic communities online and in-person, revolving primarily around Ayahuasca, but also psilocybin mushrooms, LSD, MDMA, and other related substances. While the fieldwork has included both facilitators and participants, this article focuses solely on the facilitators, as this is an understudied area (Callon et al. 2021), and since the purpose of this article is to compare shamanic vocations. We draw up a general description of the sample and then give a more detailed description of two selected facilitators. Eight psychedelic facilitators were interviewed and followed over time. The interviews lasted 2-5 hours, and several of the facilitators were interviewed 3-4 times. Participant observation was carried out during retreats and ceremonies with a few of them. The facilitators who participated in the study were all male and primarily in their forties with a few exceptions of both younger and older. We did not encounter several female facilitators in the field, but while they showed appreciation of and interest in the study, they did not volunteer for interviews. Of the facilitators who participated in interviews, multiple educational backgrounds were found. Some had academic backgrounds and had been working in a completely different field until discovering Ayahuasca, and then engaged in a shamanic or therapeutic degree of some sort. Others had begun with a yoga teacher training diploma or engagement in other forms of body therapy and then made their way into psychedelics later. Common for all of them was that it was through their own psychedelic experiences that they came to change their lives and become facilitators. The Danish sample of facilitators is thus strikingly similar to the sample of ceremony leaders in a recent study (Callon et al. 2021), in terms of age, overall variety and types of educational profiles, and in their cultural backgrounds as western with Indigenous Ayahuasca training. Characteristic of the Danish sample is an engagement with multiple psychedelics and related substances, where Ayahuasca plays a major but not exclusive part.

Some of the facilitators had really specialized in leading Ayahuasca ceremonies, such as Adam, on whom we focus in the next section. Some offered both Ayahuasca ceremonies and sessions based on psilocybin mushrooms, LSD, MDMA, and a variety of legal or semi-legal substances such as Kambo or Cacao. Most of them also offered to help with processes of micro-dosing on the side. And a few explicitly chose not to facilitate Ayahuasca ceremonies, and only focus on other substances, such as James, whom we also introduce in the following section. Regardless of these differences in the sample, all the interviewed facilitators had found their path through Ayahuasca.
TWO DANISH FACILITATORS

In this section, we focus on two facilitators: Adam, the founder of a retreat center and one of the main facilitators of Ayahuasca ceremonies in Denmark, and James, co-founder of a psychedelic network and facilitator of ceremonies and retreats, not with Ayahuasca but using cacao and mushrooms. While they have widely different practices and approaches, they have both learned to become facilitators through their Ayahuasca experiences and their relationship to the specific plants in the Ayahuasca brew. We have selected these two facilitators because they represent some important differences in the overall data on shamanic practices: They belong to two different social arenas within Danish psychedelic communities and have chosen to use their facilitator roles quite differently. While Adam works exclusively with Ayahuasca, James deliberately has chosen not to. Further, some of their differences are in some ways paralleled by the two Peruvian shamans, whom we shall discuss further on.

Adam. Adam is in his early forties, and for several years has been facilitating Ayahuasca ceremonies and retreats in the Danish countryside. He calls the use of Ayahuasca “transformative work” and regards the plants as medicinal and intelligent beings who know and understand much more than us humans. Adam used to live a what he now terms “destructive lifestyle” with lots of drugs, alcohol, sex, and selfish actions. He also engaged in drug smuggling and dealing until he got caught and served time in prison. It was not until a friend asked him to join an Ayahuasca ceremony that he became familiar with the “plant-medicine,” as he calls it, and its universe. At the time, he was drawn to anything that had to do with drugs, and simply said yes, not having any idea what it would lead to. Among several important things, he explains that the plants told him that he needed to devote his life to facilitating ceremonies for others, helping others and the world to become a better place. He eventually decided to travel to the Amazon to live with shamans and receive training, going through several periods of dieting with plants, and following the work of established shamans in the jungle. He learned to cook the brew and upon returning to Denmark, he made a deal with a shaman in Peru to provide him with the two plants that form the basis of the Ayahuasca brew through the postal system.

At first, Adam and a friend, who also spent time in the Amazon, facilitated small ceremonies in different locations through word of mouth. Because of the demand, they decided to find a more set location and establish a retreat center with monthly ceremonies and several facilitators, as well as voluntary assistants. The ceremonies are almost always fully booked months in
advance, and weekend retreats comprise vegan food, yoga, meditation, nature walks, Ayahuasca or other substance-based ceremonies, as well as housing and sometimes transportation. The cost is similar to a weekend yoga retreat and is thus not something everyone can afford, reminiscent of the description of Ayahuasca drinking as a “bourgeois phenomenon” (Tupper 2018, 184). However, volunteers who help out at ceremonies can sometimes be granted a free or low-cost ceremony spot, making Adam’s retreat center appealing to a clientele that is quite diverse. Adam explains that he hates asking for money for his services but he needs to pay bills and get by, and also provide all the resources for the retreats. He dreams of being able to have a self-sustaining community where he could facilitate ceremonies for very little or no money, and he seems to slowly be working towards that goal, gathering more and more people around him, and, having found a place in the countryside that is both beautiful, remote, and not so expensive. Being remote, he explains, has its advantages since Ayahuasca as a substance is not legal or well-understood in Denmark. Adam says that Ayahuasca has saved his life:

*Had it not been for this plant-medicine, I probably would not have been alive, and I definitely would not have been a nice person. I actually told Aya that I wished to die. But she did not let me. And I am very grateful for that now.*

He looks back at his destructive self and feels indebted to the plant, but also acknowledges that it is not the easy path in life to facilitate Ayahuasca ceremonies in Denmark. He realizes that there are many ethically complicated issues with this kind of work. He screens potential participants, and asks about their medication and medical condition but of course relies on their telling the truth or knowing if they are fit to go through drinking Ayahuasca. He has experienced several times that participants have such an intense experience that they either think they have fallen in love with him, or that they feel a calling to go and start their own practice without having the necessary knowledge and skills to do so in a safe and proper way.

He and the group of facilitators have made a rule that they cannot get romantically involved with participants, suggesting that he and his co-facilitators are aware of some of the problematic aspects of the relationship between shamans and participants (Peluso 2014) but both he and some of the others have not always been able to stick to their rule. He also acknowledges that one of the problems with his retreat setup is that it does not include a lot of what is commonly termed “integration work.” He wants to strengthen and develop this aspect, as he, like so many others, believes that the ceremonies in themselves only start the paths towards healing and therapeutic work, but that a lot of the work lies in the integration of psychedelic
experiences into everyday life afterwards, a similar point made by other ceremony leaders (Callon et al. 2021). Adam also sees somewhat of a business opportunity by offering integration workshops and other kinds of retreats that are not based on illegal activities, but rather yoga, meditation, or holotropic breathwork, so that he has a lucrative business founded on legal services, with a small—not so openly marketed—part, which continues to offer Ayahuasca ceremonies to a trusted crowd of followers.

James. James is also in his early forties. He is a freelance artist, working in the music and nightlife industry, creating both sound and visuals for parties as well as psychedelic simulation experiences. He first came into contact with Ayahuasca through friends in the nightlife industry, where drugs and alcohol played a huge role. James has never really used any of these substances apart from an occasional drink or joint, but when he saw how Ayahuasca changed something in some of the people that he would characterize as rather dependent on drugs, he got interested in what the plant brew could help him with. His first Ayahuasca experience was with a traveling facilitator, who was a trained psychologist but had also lived with shamans in the Amazon for several years. This combination appealed to James and has inspired him to gather a team of people, who, with their different backgrounds (social work, psychology, medicine, psychedelics, arts), make up a facilitating team for psychedelic ceremonies.

James describes Ayahuasca as a divine tool, but then pauses and explains that he does not really find it fitting to call it a tool.

*It is so much more than a tool. It’s a spirit, a sacrament. From the moment you decide to work with the plant-medicine, it starts working, even before you ingest it. It has taught me to follow the right path, and I am extremely grateful for this.*

He is, however, worried about the way psychedelics are framed or understood in Denmark (as in most of Europe), as he sees mainly an intellectual or scientific approach as opposed to a more spiritually founded one. He believes that it is only through pain and hardship that we, as humans, will succeed to find and feel love and gratefulness and that this is something we need to learn from Indigenous Peoples.

Even though it is through Ayahuasca that James has become a facilitator of psychedelic ceremonies, he will not facilitate Ayahuasca ceremonies, nor be the “face” or person behind it, as a shaman typically is. He feels that Ayahuasca “belongs” to Indigenous People, and that the plants have a history and origin that he is not able to work with in the same way that a shaman
has, when he comes from or has lived for a long time in the Amazonian region. Another facilitator shares this point of view:

*It is not my substance, I could never claim to know how to guide people through an Ayahuasca ceremony. It wouldn’t feel right. I have too much respect for the plant to do that. But I have learned so much from it.*

This perspective brings to mind issues of cultural appropriation also highlighted in research on Ayahuasca (Fotiou 2016). But James’s decision to not facilitate Ayahuasca ceremonies also has to do with not wanting to claim to have the skills or abilities to heal people more generally. He says that all he does is to facilitate a safe space for people to realize and meet their challenges, but that it is “the medicine” (i.e., psychedelic substance) that is doing the work. So, while he learns from and follows what Ayahuasca shows him, he does not feel entitled to take the role as an “Ayahuasca.” While he sees himself as a facilitator, James does not want to be a lone facilitator but prefers to work in a team of diversely educated or informed individuals. This has both to do with the fact that psychedelics are not well-understood or well-recognized in Danish society, and also that he finds it too vulnerable and ethically problematic for one person to guide someone with challenges. Rather he finds it much more appealing to offer an array of perspectives, abilities, and personalities, so that people who come to work on themselves can choose exactly what they find most fitting.

The ceremonies and events that James and his team offer are primarily announced either by word of mouth or through membership-based social media platforms, regardless of whether the ceremonies are based on illegal mushrooms or legal cacao. Thus, the “clients” are primarily within a trusted network. James is also a very active person in the political struggle to legalize or decriminalize psychedelic substances, although again, he prefers not to be the main face of it, but rather the mastermind behind it. Through his art and his ability to find the right people to work with, he manages to influence and make his perspectives heard, without anyone really knowing that he is the person doing it.

Both James and Adam encountered Ayahuasca simultaneously as a drug among other drugs and as a way out of the sort of lifestyle or environment that relied heavily on drugs and alcohol. In that sense, their first encounter with Ayahuasca was not as anything sacred, but in ways strikingly similar to how the Danish state might view it: as a substance that is illegal, and in this sense similar to other psychedelic substances, and as a potential medicinal path out of destructive behavior or surroundings. Yet their intense visionary experiences with Ayahuasca have led them to a radical transformation of their ways of life and devotion to the plants themselves—in terms of the
framework established in the article, they found a vocation following an experience of the sacred. Their responses to this calling differ. While Adam (and several other Danish facilitators) became a professional Ayahuasquero, receiving training in the Amazon, importing the plants to Denmark, and leading ceremonies in a similar fashion to other western ceremony leaders (Callon et al. 2021), James has refused to directly follow through with his calling out of respect for the plants’ sacredness and focuses instead on other psychedelic substances and ceremonies. However, both participate in the institutionalization of their vocation, not only with the organization of regular ceremonies but also in the establishment of networks of facilitators or the edification of ethical guidelines. Their encounter with Ayahuasca has led both of them to profoundly alter their lives, going both against social norms and against their own inclinations—as is clear, for example, in Adam’s struggle to follow the ethical code he and his co-facilitators have set themselves, or in James’s activism to decriminalize psychedelic substances more generally.

**AYAHUASCA FACILITATION IN PERU**

Unlike Denmark, Peru has remained a very religious society, though in ambivalent ways. Catholicism was imposed by the Spanish Crown on both the Indigenous and the settler population up until Peru became a secular state. A vast majority of the population identifies as Catholic (between 73% and 77%), yet this number is much lower than it was in 1972 (96.4%) or even 2007 (81.33%) (Lecaros 2015, 35). Behind these numbers hides a growing disconnect between popular religiosity and institutional religiosity. For example, in terms of the sacraments, not all of those who consider themselves Catholics are even baptized, a third of the baptized ones participate in their first communion, a fourth never get confirmed, and there is a strong tendency among younger generations for couples to live together without getting married (Lecaros 2015, 38). Yet those who do not take part in the rites of the Catholic Church may nevertheless consider themselves very religious—as, for example, a group of tradesmen who performed daily rites at home and participated in pilgrimages but did not go to mass or even get married (Mujica 2004). Moreover, even though one may not take part in Church sacraments or understand oneself to be particularly Catholic, the social influence of the Church is difficult to avoid, as it manages both elite and popular educational institutions, from schools to universities, as well as many caritative institutions (Lecaros 2015, 45). As a result, and unlike in Denmark, the Church does play a very public role and shapes social norms and values (Lecaros 2015, 46).
In this context, the use of Ayahuasca takes on a very different valence than in Denmark. On the one hand, it is widespread in the Upper Amazon among Indigenous populations. There, it may be practiced alongside a Catholic religiosity, or it may also be given up during episodes of individual or collective conversion to Evangelical or Catholic Christianity (Gow 1994). Due to its association with Indigenous People, it is often scorned by the middle classes as backward, and for this reason some of the richest districts of Lima prohibit Ayahuasca ceremonies. Yet the same association also appeals to other members of the middle class as an alternative to Catholicism. Finally, Ayahuasca is also a lucrative opportunity, which means that tour guides and travel agencies will offer ceremonies alongside visits to Macchu Pichu and rafting classes. As a result, some may downplay the “sacredness” of these ceremonies in order to make them more compatible with Catholic rites or with economic activities, whereas others may emphasize its “sacredness” to present Ayahuasca as an alternative to Catholicism.

In search of Ayahuasca, a potential client or patient has a variety of opportunities to take part in the rituals and consume Ayahuasca. Throughout the past decades, the ceremonies have gained increasing attention by tourists. This has led to the establishment of Ayahuasca retreat companies, offering retreat trips or one-day tours, also including other rituals such as “pacha mama,” coffee ground analysis and ceremonies that are often viewed as “related.” Furthermore, especially popular tourist destinations such as Cuzco, experience an increasing number of self-employed, locally-run “Shaman Shops” offering afternoon sessions several times a week. These establishments, both locally-owned as well as foreign-owned, communicate their services publicly, through websites and social media profiles, as well as print media, posters, and advertisements in the areas around shops and head offices. As opposed to these publicly advertised sessions, some shamans facilitate sessions in their free time apart from daily jobs. These shamans tend to only hold ceremonies for friends, family members, or people who have been “sent” or advised by personal contacts to get in touch with the specific shaman. Another major difference between these types of facilitators is the monetization of their services. While retreat companies and shaman shops charge several thousands of dollars, private shamans may not charge money for the service itself but only to make up for costs of acquiring materials needed for the ceremony.

The Peruvian data in this article stem from eight months of ethnographic fieldwork in 2019–2020. The fieldwork included interviews and participant observation in and around retreat centers or private practices in different areas of Peru, including the central areas of Lima, the city of Cuzco as well as the Amazon rainforest area north of Cuzco. A total of 12 informants were included in the fieldwork, out of which four are shamans (referring to...
themselves either as shaman or curandero), four participants of Ayahuasca ceremonies, one ceremony assistant and guest manager at a retreat center, as well as one owner and manager of a retreat company. The present inquiry focuses on the stories of two shamans, Rudi and Omar, who were selected because their differing views on shamanism, their shamanic practices, and the marketization of Ayahuasca rituals, which represent the two main modes of handling the facilitation of Ayahuasca ceremonies in the Peruvian data: While Rudi holds ceremonies in his spare time, and only for clients who directly approach him with a certain issue or purpose that they ask him to assist with, Omar holds ceremonies to make a living, offering sessions several times a week, which he publicly advertises on different social media outlets. Further, while Rudi believes that ceremonies must take place in the rainforest, Omar has no problem facilitating ceremonies in an urban setting. These differences show that although referring to themselves under the same technical term “shaman,” Rudi follows the ritual and his routines as a sort of “profession,” or “professionalization” of the Ayahuasca ritual, as opposed to Omar, who represents an entrepreneurial mindset and approach to Ayahuasca facilitation in Peru. Shaman interviews took 1-2 hours each and were at times accompanied by a local translator.

Two Peruvian facilitators

Rudi. Rudi is a 37-year-old male, living in San Martin, a region in the rainforest, where he owns and runs a small hotel and works as a painter. He holds Ayahuasca ceremonies on an irregular basis, depending on clients. He refers to himself as a curandero when describing his role as a facilitator and does not consider it as a job or professional occupation, but neither as a leisure activity. He was 15 years old when he first participated in an Ayahuasca ceremony, also in San Martin, where he was born, grew up, and still lives today. He began to take Ayahuasca in a family setting because his relatives are “Ayahuasqueros” themselves and introduced him to the plant and the ceremonies. From there he continued partaking in ceremonies. He has 22 years of experience with taking Ayahuasca and describes facilitating sessions for the past three years. Therefore, his path of becoming a facilitator started 19 years after his first personal experience with the Ayahuasca plant, brew, and ceremony.

He explains that he first started to facilitate sessions himself due to what he calls the “initiation with the plant.” He describes taking Ayahuasca in a ceremony and meeting a spirit and visual experiences where he saw his own death as well as a dinner setting, including objects he identified as sacred. He interpreted the scene to depict his last supper. That specific session was much more intense than previous ones, which is what led him to the
understanding that it was an “initiation.” It was clear to him after this that offering ceremonies would be part of his life from that moment on, and it was only the first step in a process that ultimately led him to becoming a facilitator. He did not understand this as a career path but as a duty prescribed to him by the spirit of the plant, to which he ascribes sacredness and power. He recognizes this duty in two ways: first, as a duty towards the plant itself, which he has to obey, as it is a higher power that has the ability and agency, according to his belief, to propose choices and actions on his behalf; and second, as a duty towards the people that make use of his services. He explains his relation to the plants and plant spirits as a continuously evolving journey of communication and physical experience shaped by deep respect and being open to education:

Three, four years ago, I did not have this connection to the spirits that I have now. I was just singing and they were just listening, but today there is a connection. There is a working connection between the spirits and me.

He offers Ayahuasca ceremonies to people he calls his “patients.” This further implies a relation of a “healer” (curandero) and a person in need of help. He sees it as a duty imposed on him through the plant spirit to use his capacities in order to help people that suffer from (mostly) mental conditions such as addictions, anxieties, panic, depression, and so on. Rudi does not market his services in any way, neither being a registered institution or company, nor communicating his offers to the public through media or social media or considering sessions as a source of income. In fact, he does not charge for the sessions themselves but only for the materials needed on a case by case basis. Prices may therefore vary depending on the materials and plants he includes in his therapy with a specific client. The price is derived from gathering the plant itself, which grows naturally around his area of residence, therefore being free and legal to access for him, as well as other plants and ailments such as teas, tobacco, and other plants that he may have to pay for.

Since he regards himself as a communicator that physically brings a person in need together with the plant spirit of Ayahuasca, he establishes a doctor-patient relationship with his clients. This includes a routine that consists of a preliminary consultation, discussing existing issues and consumption of various substances, based on which he develops a list of materials needed, diet, and Ayahuasca ceremony schedule that his patients follow. These plans vary from patient to patient, which is also a reason why he does not offer group ceremonies as a pre-established service. In the same manner, he refuses clients who want to take Ayahuasca out of curiosity or without what he calls a
“purpose,” since wanting to take Ayahuasca for fun denotes to him a lack of respect for the capacities of the plant and its sacredness. For Rudi, the plant and its capacities are “holy” and part of a natural power structure and order that is found within nature. This connection to nature is an integral part of his work, which is why he only facilitates sessions in San Martin. According to his belief, taking the plants away from their natural habitat results in a “distortion,” and he has strong opinions about offering Ayahuasca to people outside the rainforest:

This is prostitution of the Ayahuasca. The respect towards the plants is what’s most important, and you don’t show that by doing this.

Nevertheless, he does not question the capabilities of those who decide to move to urban settings as a personal decision, but thinks that offering Ayahuasca ceremonies in those settings goes against the natural order of things.

Omar. Omar is 32 years old, living in Lima in the District of San Borja, where he primarily hosts his Ayahuasca ceremonies, although he also operates outside of Lima and along the Atlantic coast. He took Ayahuasca for the first time when he was 16 years old. He describes having carried out the diet one year before taking the “medicine” for the first time. At the time, he worked as an assistant for a shaman in Madre de Dios, a rainforest area in the North of Peru and describes knowing the substance before taking it himself because of this role. His first two encounters with taking Ayahuasca did not have major effects on him, as he describes in his own words, but at the third session he was frequented by the spirit of Ayahuasca. According to him, the plant told him to not only take Ayahuasca himself but to “initiate himself with its mysteries and help to awaken other people.” From that point on, he began taking Ayahuasca on a frequent basis and started an apprenticeship on becoming a shaman over the course of 5 years. He began facilitating sessions on his own at the age of 22, so at the time of participating in this study, he had 10 years of experience as a facilitator. He refers to himself as Maestro in regard to his role as a facilitator. Alongside his role as a shaman, he has a bachelor’s degree in Philosophy and finished his master’s degree in Anthropology in 2018 at a local university in Lima. He refers to himself as a philosopher in his profession as well.

He reacted to the calling by moving to the jungle permanently over the course of his apprenticeship of becoming a shaman. He then moved back to the city of Lima again afterwards. He established WhatsApp, Instagram, and Google accounts to communicate his services to the public. At the time of the interview, he was in the process of creating his own homepage and describes having a fan page for his sessions. Potential clients can contact him
via these channels, but he primarily arranges contacts through WhatsApp, where he arranges a personal consultation with each client to discuss the schedule and the diet. He offers sessions for up to 12 people at a time but will also allow sessions for more people if collaborating with additional shamans.

Unlike Rudi, then, Omar has no problem organizing Ayahuasca ceremonies in urban contexts and for larger groups of participants, nor does he shy away from actively marketing his services. Yet that does not mean that he takes the plant lightly. He decided to follow the calling and dedicated five years to his apprenticeship right after his encounter with the plant spirit, without questioning the spiritual encounter. Moreover, although he communicates and offers his services in an institutionalized way through a professional WhatsApp account and several other social media outlets, he describes not accepting clients that engage in “mystic tourism” or are “in search of self-realization.” He explains having conditions as to whom he accepts as a client but does not specify those further. Each client has to arrange a personal consultation prior to entering a session, where motives and aspects important to him and the client are discussed. He also argues against the sorts of arguments put forward by Rudi, according to which only the forest would provide a proper setting for Ayahuasca ceremonies. For him, this separation of nature and culture is subject to a western ontology, one that separates nature and culture, in which he does not believe because he sees himself as Indigenous.

*It is wrong to say that you can only do ceremonies in the jungle, it’s like saying you can only do acupuncture in China.*

For him, nature is part of the shaman and the plant and can be transported wherever the session is held. He describes the spirit of the plant entering the consumer no matter where this happens.

*We refer to people as part of nature as well, there is no distinction made. We call humans nature too. Everyone that starts with this knowledge and starts practicing in this discipline has to make a pact or become a unity with the spirits of the plant.*

Both Rudi and Omar became Ayahuasca curanderos as a result of their visionary encounters with Ayahuasca. They made sense of the implications of this calling in different ways. Rudi understood it as an interdiction to commercialize it or to practice outside of the forest, whereas Omar made a living out of it in Peru’s capital city. Yet Omar justified his perspective not with recourse to secular explanations, for example, that the molecules that make
up Ayahuasca do not care where and how they’re used, but instead refused the terms of the discussion for themselves being too secular and Western. In other words, they each interpret the experience of Ayahuasca’s sacredness and how it obligates them in a contemporary Peruvian context where Ayahuasca is identified with indigeneity but where indigeneity itself is contested. Whereas to Rudi this means remaining outside of urban, capitalist society and as close to the Amazonian forest and non-commercial practices as possible, for Omar Indigenous practices have a central place in urban capitalism.

THE SACRED AND THE SECULAR

In this article, we have given thought to experiences of the sacred through Ayahuasca, based on the trajectories of four different individuals, who, in each their own ways, have come to carry out their shamanic practices because of these sacred experiences. The selection of these four individuals is based on larger empirical data sets from studies conducted in Denmark and Peru, respectively, and function as analytical cases (Lund 2014) for the development of shamanic vocations in a comparative perspective. Such cases allow for more in-depth ethnographic descriptions, while still representing the major findings in the overall empirical material. It is important to note that, as the study is based on convenience sampling and a somewhat hidden, hard-to-reach population, it cannot be considered representative, but rather gives insight into important contextual aspects of the emergence of shamanic vocations in a comparative perspective.

While the social and cultural contexts, and individual experiences and interpretations of Ayahuasca as a sacred plant differ, it is notable that none of our interlocutors question the experience of being called upon to practice as shamans or facilitators of rituals and ceremonies for other people. They all describe being told by the plant to follow this path in life, and while they respond to this with different kinds of practices and views on what they do, they follow the plants’ orders and regard them as some form of truth, intelligence, or divine intervention, reminiscent of how other scholars have described Ayahuasca consumption experiences (Doyle 2012; Tupper 2002; McKenna 2005). This process of self-transcendence (Joas 2021) and self-formation (Barbalet 2008) that comes out of individual interactions with the Ayahuasca brew suggests that the experienced sacredness is less connected to the social and cultural contexts in which they take place than it is about expressions of the tensions between Ayahuasca’s diasporic movements around the world (Labate, Cavnar, and Gearin 2018) and contemporary forms of selfhood.
The ways in which the Ayahuasca vocation is carried out, however, is highly dependent on the social and cultural surroundings in which they exist. While shamanic identities have for a long time been associated with ambiguity, ambivalence, and various other forms of controversy (Labate, Cavnar, and Gearin 2018), there are some legal, political, and social restrictions in Denmark as opposed to in Peru, which makes practicing in Denmark even more controversial. Where the Danish facilitators risk criminal charges, stigmatization, and misunderstanding, the Peruvian ones are less “out of place” with their Ayahuasca practice, due to historical and cultural understandings of Ayahuasca as a practice and substance that is far removed from contemporary drug regulation and policies (Labate, Cavnar, and Gearin 2018). While the facilitators in Denmark and Peru are located in both urban and rural settings, they explain the relationship to their surroundings differently. For example, while Rudi links his location to the importance of nature and the origins of the sacred plants, Adam’s primary reason to be in a rural setting has to do with lessening the financial burden and being “off the radar,” hidden away from authorities. It is not that Adam does not appreciate it and find it more fitting to be surrounded by nature, however, settling there had more to do with contextual aspects than his relationship with the plants. Similarly, while both Omar and James practice their vocations in urban settings and relate their practice in some ways to academic studies, Omar is comfortable with being a shaman and facilitating Ayahuasca sessions due to his long-standing experience and family history, while James feels that he, as a white, male European person, has no right whatsoever to practice these sacred ceremonies, nor be the sole person behind healing, transforming, or working with people who feel they need help. While being at opposite ends of the spectrum due to their different cultural backgrounds and levels of experience with Ayahuasca, the protective efforts that Rudi and James both practice in relation to the plants are quite similar.

In spite of several cultural and geographical differences among our four practicing individuals, and the overall empirical datasets, it is interesting to note that they do not market their services so differently or describe their work in such different terms. There are of course individual differences between whether they regard psychedelic ceremony facilitation a profession or not, but common for them all is a careful negotiation and handling of who to choose as clients. They all rely on trusted networks and word-of-mouth communication, and in Peru, as in Denmark, much marketization happens through online apps or forums. Rudi is of course much less involved in actual marketization than the three others, but they all are quite restrictive in terms of allowing access to their ceremonies. This protective and selective approach may be connected to an inherent ambivalence about the monetary aspect of offering ceremonies as a professional service. They all express
wishes to not charge or at least profit from their shamanic practices, yet they do need to cover costs, and for those who do not work at a “regular” job, they also need to make a living. The economics of Ayahuasca has been examined by several scholars, both in investigating the Ayahuasca tourism industry and entrepreneurship (Peluso 2018) as well as the uneasiness of putting a monetary value on Ayahuasca due to its powers to show itself as something beyond numeric value (Tupper 2018). As Tupper suggests, the facilitators of Ayahuasca ceremonies that he followed in his research did not take on their calling to practice as shamans in order to make money (ibid., 2018), nor did the shamans or facilitators we studied, with a few exceptions of those working at tourist facilities in Cuzco. However, while the Danish facilitators, each in their own way, have more or less left their so-called regular work lives in order to devote themselves to their vocation, Ayahuasca has provided them with a new way to make a living, thus combining the secular and the sacred through the shamanic vocation. Whether they have followed their vocation to avoid a “regular work life” or left their work lives to follow their vocation might be a relevant question to ask, and in attempting to answer it, we suggest that it is both. Shepard writes that “Ayahuasca might be the contemporary world’s way of having it both ways, being simultaneously rooted in the traditional and modern, ecstatic and scientific…” (Shepard 2018). We might add: secular and sacred. While this view focuses on how individuals actively develop new conceptions of who they are and which role they serve in society, it simultaneously brings on thoughts of how Ayahuasca moves in mysterious ways, as a “plant teacher” that attempts to change the world, suggesting that the plants have an agenda beyond human thought and action (McKenna 2005).

Conceiving of Ayahuasca as a sacred plant, in the sense that Joas (2021) gives to the concept “sacred,” can help us better make sense of the effects it can have on the lives of both individuals and the societies they belong to—particularly in highly secular societies like Denmark. As a self-transcendent experience that requires a re-interpretation of selfhood, Ayahuasca leads to people changing how they live and adopting new values. In some cases, individuals may feel called by the plant to administer the plant themselves. Those who take that call seriously have to more or less radically transform their lives, even at the risk of social ostracism. This is particularly clear in a Danish setting, where Ayahuasca is illegal, but it may also be the case in Peru, where the plant is associated with racialized and marginalized groups. The meaning of an Ayahuasca vocation also depends on the forms of religiosity that are predominant in each society. In Peru, a society that is highly religious, though often at a distance from the official Church and its sacraments, the Ayahuasca vocation may appear as a way to reclaim a pre-colonial tradition, as is the case with Omar, and several others in the
Peruvian sample. In a highly secular society like Denmark, the relation to the Church is less important than the fact of a spiritual practice, as James suggests. In fact, he and his groups of facilitators are increasingly convinced that Denmark needs a new church, and that perhaps Ayahuasca can provide some of what is needed in this struggle.

NOTES

1 We explain in the next section what we mean by sacred in this context—in brief, following Joas (2021), it is an experience that transcends the self and leads to a transformation of norms and values.

2 San Borja is not one of the areas of Lima where Ayahuasca ceremonies are prohibited.

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