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VINE OF THE SOUL: ENCOUNTERS WITH AYAHUASCA
A FILM BY RICHARD MEECH

Can a sacred plant from the Amazon heal our minds and spirits? For centuries, indigenous people of South America have used ayahuasca, a psychoactive plant medicine, to cure all manner of psycho-spiritual ills.

Today, thousands of Westerners, seeking healing and spiritual awakening, attend ayahuasca ceremonies around the world to drink the vision-inducing tea and experience dramatic transformations in their lives.

“Vine Of The Soul: Encounters With Ayahuasca” is a documentary that explores this brave new world, offering insights into the nature of faith, mystical experience and self-healing through a heightened state of consciousness.

Filmmaker Richard Meech follows key protagonists as they journey to Peru – and back home – capturing in verité style both the life-altering epiphanies and nights of terror encountered after drinking the sacred brew.

Is ayahuasca a doorway to direct knowledge of the divine or a path that leads to psychological trauma? Can it cure modern addictions to drugs and alcohol or is ayahuasca itself a possible substance of abuse? Some people call it a medicine, others a sacrament; the Amazonian shamans say it is simply a ‘plant teacher’ that tells you what you need to know.

Throughout the film, in-depth interviews with Peruvian and Canadian shamans, ethnobotanist Dennis McKenna, addiction expert Dr. Gabor Maté, and scholar Kenneth Tupper speak to the increasing use of ayahuasca outside the Amazon and the potential benefits for Western medicine, personal spiritual growth and a new understanding of nature.

Featuring Guillermo Arévalo, Metsa Niwue and Ronin Niwe. Shot on location at Espíritu de Anaconda near Iquitos, Peru and at other locations in North America.

Winner of the Silver Chris Award for "Best Spiritual Documentary" at the Columbus International Film + Video Festival

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DIRECTOR’S STATEMENT

In the mid 1990s, I started hearing about Westerners going to the Amazon to participate in traditional ayahuasca ceremonies. These people were not the usual collection of anthropologists and enthobotanists doing fieldwork, but ordinary folks looking for emotional healing and spiritual awakening.

For years I had wondered why there was no recognized way for non-indigenous people to explore the power of sacred plants. When I made the “Millennium” series 20 years ago – the subtitle was ‘Tribal Wisdom and the Modern World’ – I questioned why we, in the modern world, had ignored this aspect of indigenous culture.

I decided to meet some of the Westerners who drink ayahuasca and to find out why they do it and how it has affected their lives.

The resulting film, “Vine Of The Soul: Encounters With Ayahuasca”, has been an extraordinary adventure and a true labor of love. I had not anticipated nor imagined the emotional depths and spiritual journeys I would be privileged to witness.

In learning about ayahuasca, both through the filming process and my own ceremonial work, I have come to appreciate that there is a wide gulf in our popular understanding about the nature of healing.

Living with a profoundly material worldview leaves very little, if any, space for what can be called the ‘spiritual’. Spirituality and healing? What does spirituality have to do with healing? A lot more than I had thought, it turns out.

With ayahuasca one can have a direct connection with the divine or source of all creation, something one actually experiences, viscerally, in the depths of one’s own being. It can be healing on the most profound levels.

How extraordinary then, at the turn of our twenty-first century that we should be rediscovering the power of the sacred medicine, ayahuasca, that has been around for thousands of years. Perhaps it’s just a coincidence, a measure of good timing. But just think: here is a humble jungle plant that has the ability to affect the consciousness of the one species that can determine the fate of all species – just when that need is greater than ever.

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RICHARD MEECH

Richard Meech, President of Meech Grant Productions Ltd., has 20 years experience as a documentary filmmaker and television producer. In 2009, he completed “Vine Of The Soul: Encounters With Ayahuasca”, a one-hour film about ayahuasca, the sacred psychoactive medicine from the Amazon that is changing modern lives.

Meech was the creator of the internationally acclaimed series “Millennium: Tribal Wisdom And The Modern World”. He and his partner, Michael Grant, produced and directed the epic cross-cultural anthropology series of 10 one-hour films seen by over 70 million viewers worldwide (Global, PBS, BBC). The Emmy Award-winning series also won two Geminis, a silver Hugo award (Chicago) and the gold medal at the Houston International Festival.

More recently, Meech was an executive producer and the series producer for the hit CBC series “72 Hours: True Crime”. Over three seasons, he produced 45 half-hour shows. The first two seasons each won the New York Television Festival “World Medal” for best docu-drama series.

In 2000, Meech directed the one-hour documentary film, “In The Shadow Of A Saint”, which explored writer Ken Wiwa’s struggle to come to terms with his father, the late Nigerian activist and martyr, Ken Saro-Wiwa. The film received two Gemini nominations and won Honorable Mention at the 2001 Hot Docs Film Festival.

In 2003, Meech was the producer and writer for two hours of a thirteen-part series for National Geographic called “Doctors Without Borders: Life In The Field”. The documentary verité series profiled volunteers from crisis zones around the world and aired on National Geographic Television and Life Network.

Richard Meech lives in Toronto, Canada. He graduated cum laude from Harvard University and was the recipient of a Rotary International Scholarship for graduate study at the Sorbonne, University of Paris.

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THE CURANDEROS

Guillermo Arévalo

“Ayahuasca makes you learn. Ayahuasca is a means for man to get to know the different realms of existence. The source of all creation makes us see where man comes from ... that he comes from space where energy comes from, in the form of light. We are all formed through a relationship of nature, energy and light.”

With over 35 years experience in the field of Amazonian shamanism, Guillermo Arévalo is recognized worldwide as a master curandero or healer. Among his people, the Shipibo-Conibo, he is known and revered by his medicine name, Ketsenbetsa, which means ‘echo of the universe’.

Guillermo is the founder of Espíritu de Anaconda, an organization and healing center near Iquitos, Peru, dedicated to the practice of traditional Amazonian medicine known as vegetalismo. This traditional practice facilitates the spiritual awakening and physical healing of the individual.

In his teaching, Guillermo stresses the fundamental healing practice of the medicine known as the dieta or plant diet. Ayahuasca is considered the vehicle that is used to connect, communicate and see but knowledge of medicinal and master plants acquired through the dieta are the necessary tools that create the healing.

The Espíritu de Anaconda healing center welcomes people from all over the world seeking healing and spiritual transformation.

Guillermo’s new retreat further in the jungle, Luz Cosmica, is designed for serious apprentices who will spend a minimum of one year in what he calls ‘a school for shamanism.’
**Ronin Niwe (Dave)**

“When we drink ayahuasca outside of the Amazon we’re not surrounded by the plants. So it’s also a different experience. But you, but you can still take the spirit of the plant with you. I have the spirit of the plants inside me and the spirit of the jungle and I try to share that with people. My intention is to help people in their healing...the healing of our communities...the healing of the planet.”

Ronin Niwe (Dave), from British Columbia, Canada, has been an apprentice of Guillermo Arévalo for the past seven years. His career path has always been directed towards the healing arts. After a life-threatening car crash in his early twenties, Dave turned to alternative health practices as an adjunct to mainstream medicine. He’s an acupuncturist and Reiki master by training although he now spends most of his professional time leading traditional ayahuasca ceremonies.

Ronin Niwe is in residence at Espíritu de Anaconda at least twice a year for a month or six weeks at a time. Through deepening his knowledge of the plant teachers, Dave prepares himself for ceremonies in Canada and other parts of the world. “It’s a life path,” says Dave. “If you want to do this work well then you dedicate your whole life to it.”

**Metsa Niwue (François)**

“I think ayahuasca has two functions: one is self-discovery and trying to understand better who you are. It also helps you to connect with the invisible world, the spirit world. It could be related to nature, the meaning of God, having a clearer sense of what it means for you in your life. So it helps you redefine yourself in relationship to that.”

François, also known by his medicine name Metsa Niwue, is the senior Western apprentice to Guillermo Arévalo and a curandero in his own right. He helped establish Espíritu de Anaconda and has trained under Guillermo’s supervision for the last 13 years.

Originally from Paris, François now spends most of his time in Iquitos, Peru. He sees his role at Espíritu as helping to guide Western visitors in their healing process – an ability to translate the shamanic experience for the Western mind.

François credits ayahuasca with helping to rid himself of a heroin addiction and to giving him a new spiritual understanding of life. Like Guillermo and Dave, François has made a lifetime commitment to the use of ayahuasca within the *vegetalista* tradition.

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THE EXPERTS

Dr. Dennis McKenna, Ph.D.

“The notion that there is a spiritual component to healing has been totally excised from biomedicine. Spirituality and healing? What does spirituality have to do with healing? Medicine has understood the mind, the brain, as simply a complex machine. You apply the appropriate monkey wrench to the appropriate place, and you fix it, much like a mechanic might fix a car, and you're good to go, you know. And it completely misses the point. So this becomes very tricky when you start talking about how are we going to use things like ayahuasca.”

Dr. Dennis McKenna brings more than 30 years experience in biosciences, biochemistry and pharmacognosy to the Center for Spirituality and Healing, where he is a senior lecturer on topics that include ethnopharmacology and botanical medicines in health care.

In 1975, he co-authored the book, “Invisible Landscape”, with his brother Terence. The book was based on their investigations of Amazonian hallucinogens in 1971. Since that time, he has conducted extensive ethnobotanical fieldwork in the Peruvian, Colombian, and Brazilian Amazon including specific research into the pharmacology, botany and chemistry of ayahuasca.

Dr. McKenna earned his Master's Degree in Botany at the University of Hawaii in 1979 and his Doctorate of Botanical Sciences at the University of British Columbia in 1984. His wide-ranging experience includes serving as the Director of Ethnopharmacology at Shaman Pharmaceuticals and as senior research pharmacognosist for Aveda Corp. in Minneapolis, Minn.

He is a founding board member and Vice-President of the Heffter Research Institute, a non-profit scientific organization dedicated to the investigation of therapeutic applications for psychedelic plants and compounds. He was a primary organizer and key scientific collaborator for the Hoasca Project, an international biomedical study of hoasca, an ayahuasca preparation used in a sacramental context by religious groups in Brazil. Dr. McKenna is author or co-author of over 35 scientific papers in peer-reviewed journals. Here is one of his most recent papers entitled “Ayahuasca and Human Destiny”.

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Gabor Maté, M.D.

“Addiction comes from a sense of deficient emptiness. And trying to complete yourself from the outside is the essence of addiction. With ayahuasca one has an opportunity to experience oneself as whole and complete. If you can actually get that you’re whole and complete, what is there to be filled from the outside anymore? Ayahuasca can help people see that in two or three ceremonies, if it’s the appropriate shamanic leader and if it’s the right environment. Well, that has the potential to heal addictions.”

Born in Budapest, Hungary in 1944, Gabor Maté emigrated to Canada with his family in 1957. After graduating with a B.A. from the University of British Columbia and a few years as a high school English and literature teacher, he returned to school to pursue his childhood dream of being a doctor.

Dr. Maté ran a private family practice in East Vancouver for over 20 years. He was also the Medical Co-ordinator of the Palliative Care Unit at Vancouver Hospital for seven years. Currently he is the staff physician at the Portland Hotel, a residence and resource centre for the people of Vancouver's Downtown Eastside. Many of his patients suffer from mental illness, drug addiction and HIV, or all three.

Dr. Maté is the author of several books, including “In The Realm of Hungry Ghosts: Close Encounters With Addiction”. His recent personal work with ayahuasca in the context of traditional Amazonian shamanism gives him hope for the future application of this medicine in the treatment of modern addictions.

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Kenneth Tupper, Ph.D.

“I think the big difference between the use of ayahuasca today and the use of other substances in the 1960s, is a very strong understanding of the importance of ritual and the ceremonial element in fostering a therapeutic or a spiritual experience. It's not a party drug in the way that other substances have been used. The wisdom of learning though plants is a cultural tradition that goes back hundreds if not thousands of years.”

Kenneth Tupper is a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Educational Studies at the University of British Columbia. He is currently doing research in the field of drug education and policy.

Tupper is particularly interested in how policy makers should respond to re-emerging evidence of the therapeutic and other benefits of psychedelics or entheogens. After a period of quiescence for several decades, academic research on psychedelics has begun to pick up momentum and is already beginning to corroborate many of the positive findings initially generated in the 1950s and 1960s. These include not only specific medical indications for clinical disorders, but also broader psychological and/or spiritual benefits for healthy individuals.


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