

ATW-31

Introducing the Wizard

San Francisco, California

October 5, 1974

Mr. Richard H. Nolte
Institute of Current World Affairs
535 Fifth Avenue
New York, New York 10017

Dear Mr. Nolte:

I wrote the following piece as an introduction to Wizard of the Upper Amazon: The Story of Manuel Córdova-Rios by F. Bruce Lamb, scheduled for publication October 28, 1974 by the Houghton Mifflin Company, Boston:

In 1971 when I was writing The Natural Mind a friend gave me a copy of Wizard of the Upper Amazon, then just published. I read it through in one sitting, quoted excerpts from it in my own book, and recommended it to many people. Two years later, on returning from an expedition to South America, I met the author, Bruce Lamb, in New York City. Over lunch at a Brazilian restaurant we reminisced about our adventures in the south, and I learned to my dismay that Wizard was out of print and unavailable in the United States. I felt strongly that the book should be re-issued because it contained so much valuable information about the potentials of the human mind.

Andrew Weil is an Institute fellow investigating altered states of consciousness and their importance in our own society and others.

Wizard of the Upper Amazon is an extraordinary document of life among a tribe of South American Indians at the beginning of the century. For many readers the most compelling sections of the book will be the descriptions of the use of Banisteriopsis caapi, the yagé or ayahuasca of the Amazon forests. This powerful hallucinogen has long been credited with the ability to transport human beings to realms of experience where telepathy and clairvoyance are commonplace. When German scientists first isolated harmaline, an active principle of ayahuasca, they named it "telepathine" because of this association.

Manuel Córdova, the narrator of these adventures that have been recorded for us by Bruce Lamb, is now an old man, well-known as a healer in Peru. He attributes his powers to his time as a captive among the Amahuaca Indians, in particular to intensive training sessions conducted under the influence of ayahuasca. In a matter-of-fact tone Córdova tells how he learned the lore of the forest and the Amahuaca directly from the visions that followed upon the drinking of ayahuasca extract. He also describes vividly his repeated experiences of shared consciousness with his captors: group vision sessions in which all participants see the same visions simultaneously.

These passages are the high points of the narrative. They leave us awed at the reality of an experience that seems infinitely worthwhile. The desire to transcend one's own ego

boundaries, to share completely, if even for a moment, the consciousness of another person, must be a universal longing. It motivates many of our activities, from taking drugs to making love, and lies behind the search for new ways of getting close to one another that is so intense in our society today. But with all of our psychological sophistication we usually find ourselves insulated from other minds in some fundamental way no matter how close we get our bodies or our conscious thoughts. To read of "primitive" Indians achieving what we cannot is both frustrating and exhilarating.

Manuel Córdova's experiences suggest that there is hope for the rest of us. He learned to participate in collective visions with the Indians. Therefore, the ability to share consciousness through the medium of the visual imagination must be a capacity of the human nervous system. All of us have the necessary neural circuitry whether we use it or not.

It is interesting to speculate about the nervous mechanisms underlying the process. The visual cortex of the brain, located at the back of the head in the occipital lobes, seems implicated for several reasons. One is that it is the natural source of alpha waves, those frequencies of the electro-encephalogram that seem to correlate with meditative states and certain kinds of "psychic" phenomena. With feedback

training and practice a person can learn to generate alpha waves from all lobes of the brain, but in untrained persons, alpha is normally restricted to the occipital lobes and usually appears only with the eyes closed. It is blocked by visual input from the retina.

The visual cortex seems to produce this rhythm only when it is not occupied with the interpretation of signals coming in from the eyes. This fact meshes nicely with the observation that concentration or dissipation of visual attention can bring on altered states of consciousness. For example, in many forms of Buddhist meditation a visual focus, such as a statue or a geometrical design, is the main device used to change awareness. And hypnotists have long used sparkling ornaments and swinging pendulums to fascinate the visual attention of their subjects. An alternative is to dissipate attention by looking at nothing, as in Zen practice where the sitter may face a white screen or blank wall. All of these techniques make it easier for the visual cortex to ignore the signals coming from the retina.

We usually consider vision our highest sense, and, certainly, it has more brain devoted to it than the other senses. But there is an esoteric tradition that regards ordinary vision as deceiving and obstructive of self-development. One expression of this tradition is the card

of the Tarot deck called The Devil. It is a collection of symbols that have to do with illusion or wrong-seeing; the name of the Hebrew letter appearing on the card is ayin, meaning "eye." One of the teachings embodied in this card is that what is revealed to us by the visual sense is not reality but an appearance; that indiscriminate reliance on how things appear will lead us to formulate incorrect hypotheses about how things are.

What we see when our visual cortex is interpreting signals from somewhere other than the retina might have more to tell us about the nature of reality. This idea may be upsetting to those psychiatrists who think "visions" is a polite word for "hallucinations" and who refuse to believe in realities other than the one of consensus that we use for convenience. The Indians described in this book consider the visionary world as real as the ordinary one; they are able to go there together and learn how to function better in the world of everyday.

Córdova's story has much to say, also, about the relationship of visions to drugs. It reminds us over and over that the raw effect of the drug is a powerful but neutral stimulation of the visual imagination with an ambivalent potential for order and chaos. What the partaker of ayahuasca sees in the visions is dependent not on the drug but on other factors: the mood and setting of

the group, the physical and mental states of the participants, and, above all, the chanting of the leader of the ritual. Many persons who take hallucinogenic drugs have experienced the special relationship between sound and visions, but Chief Xumu's use of chants to bring on an orderly, logically developing sequence of visions is a highly evolved power.

Until we develop some of our latent abilities, it may not be useful for us to rush off to the Amazon to drink ayahuasca. There is no lack of things to do. We can try to spend more conscious time in our visual imagination. We can try to visualize images together or at least share the images that are already there. We can practice making and using sounds to create moods favorable to the imagination. These exercises can be practiced with or without the use of psychoactive drugs.

To be sure, extracts of Banisteriopsis are especially powerful, but our own continent is rich in natural hallucinogens, including the peyote cactus, certain morning-glories, and several varieties of psilocybin mushrooms. The problem is not to find the right substance but to find someone who knows how to use it. Even in South America today it is very difficult to find men skilled in the use of ayahuasca or yagé. Seventy years have passed since the events recorded in this book took place, and in that time many changes have come to the forests of the Amazon. The isolated incursions of rubber cutters that had already

disrupted the lives of the Amahuaca at the turn of the century have been superseded by waves of intense colonization, road-building, and even the construction of oil refineries. Traditional Indian life has suffered greatly in the wake of this sort of development, and many of the old drug rituals have vanished or degenerated.

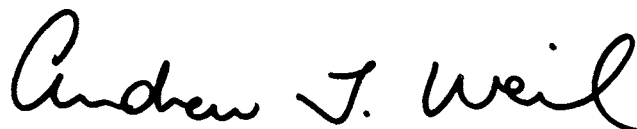
In 1972 I spent considerable time in the Putumayo Territory of Colombia, near the Ecuadorian border, searching out yagé priests. I prepared the extract with a number of shamans and was generally discouraged by the sloppiness of the preparations I witnessed. I saw the woody vine cooked hastily in dirty water in aluminum pots, sometimes merely mashed around in cold water because the yagero was too drunk on alcohol to build a fire. In many Amazonian settlements one can buy an ayahuasca ceremony for a few dollars or a few bottles of aguardiente, the raw cane whisky that is consumed so relentlessly in the hot country. And in those ceremonies the drinking of aguardiente often seems to have higher priority than the drinking of ayahuasca. I met no one who knew how to make or use the extract with anything like the care described by Manuel Córdova. The one time I drank ayahuasca I became violently sick and spent most of the night lying in a mud puddle, unable to move even to get my body out of the cold rain. I received little help from the shaman who had made the extract, and

the visions I saw were a chaotic jumble that claimed less of my attention than the physical sickness.

That adventure convinced me that I ought to prepare myself thoroughly before I try anything like ayahuasca again. It did not shake my belief in the validity of the visionary experience or the possibility of sharing consciousness through the visual imagination. And whenever I re-read Córdova's tale, I feel motivated to continue the work of preparation.

This is quite enough by way of introduction. Wizard of the Upper Amazon is a splendid book that will stimulate the reader. It is a pleasure to see it available in this new edition.

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Andrew T. Weil". The signature is written in dark ink and is positioned below the typed name.

Andrew T. Weil

Received in New York on October 11, 1974.