

préalables sur le sujet, risquant ainsi de le dissuader de poursuivre sa lecture. Ce serait dommage, car cela empêcherait ce lecteur d'accéder à une version de Champlain pourtant très simple et agréable à consulter. On peut comprendre que Thierry n'ait pas voulu reprendre le contexte qu'il a d'avantage détaillé dans l'introduction du premier volume de la série, mais une brève mise en situation, notamment en ce qui concerne les ethnonymes utilisés, aurait été nécessaire.

Outre le manque de mise en contexte, une autre difficulté à aborder l'introduction réside dans l'impression qu'elle dégage d'avoir été rédigée à la hâte. Si l'on doit souligner l'effort qu'a mis Thierry à inclure les toutes dernières publications sur Champlain, il en résulte parfois que des éléments disparates sont accolés et que des parties de texte provenant d'autres publications ont été réutilisées presque intégralement (comparer par exemple la partie concernant l'assassinat de deux Français par des Innus avec l'article de Beaulieu 2008¹). Il est dommage que cette difficulté dans la lecture de certaines parties de l'introduction occulte un peu le fait que les informations qu'on nous fournit sont fort intéressantes.

L'ouvrage sera particulièrement apprécié à des fins pédagogiques, notamment pour des enseignants ou professeurs qui veulent présenter des textes de Champlain à leurs élèves et étudiants dans un langage accessible.

Note

- 1 Beaulieu, Alain. 2008. « Lon a point d'ennemis plus grands que ces sauvages ». L'alliance franco-innue revisitée (1603-1653). *Revue d'histoire de l'Amérique française* 61(3-4):365-395.

Film Review / Revue de Film

Richard Meech, *Vine of the Soul: Encounters with Ayahuasca*, Meech Grant Productions, 2010.

Reviewer: *Victor Barac*
University of Toronto

Conceived and directed by Canadian anthropologist-filmmaker Richard Meech, *Vine of the Soul* documents key aspects of the cultural diffusion of *ayahuasca* use in North America. It follows a group of Canadian *ayahuasca* users to the Peruvian jungle and back, documenting various aspects of their experience with the powerful hallucinogenic drug. It surveys a variety of expert opinions and provides compelling insights into the meaning and context of *ayahuasca* use by non-indigenous users.

The film is not an attempt at balanced reportage providing an objective report on all sides of the issue. The focus is on the positive experience and the legitimization of the *ayahuasca* experience. It is phenomenological anthropology and advocacy anthropology at the same time.

As a work of phenomenology *Vine of the Soul* renders an extreme form of human experience more powerfully than can

even the best narrative. The setting of the *ayahuasca* experience is under the protective lush-green canopy of the Peruvian jungle, abuzz with bird and insect noises and so teeming with plant life that it does not seem so far-fetched that the "plants speak" to the *curanderos* (shamans), as they claim. The *ayahuasca* experience itself is conveyed via a balanced mixture of straight observational footage with scenes of distorted audio and visuals intended to simulate the altered state of consciousness induced by the brew.

As advocacy, the film presents *ayahuasca* use as something of potentially great value. Testimonials from several key informants, filmed at both their homes in Canada and in Peru, before and after their trip, show them to be fairly normal people and not debauched deviants. Getting these people to open up about their personal lives and their *ayahuasca* use, posing a risk to their reputations at home, must have required a great deal of trust-making work on the part of the filmmakers.

Ayahuasca is the Quechua term for a hallucinogenic brew, or tea, drunk by numerous indigenous peoples of South and Central America. Though the term is used to refer to the drink it is also the indigenous term for the jungle vine *Banisteriopsis caapi*, believed to be the key ingredient and the spiritual component of the drink. Drunk by itself, the *ayahuasca* vine produces no effects, but when combined with other plants, such as *chacrana* (*Psychotria viridis*), it produces a potent mind-altering drink that is consumed in special circumstances that are simultaneously religious and medical in nature.

Ayahuasca is the focal point of an ancient shamanic tradition. By ingesting the plant shamans enter into altered states of consciousness with the purpose of retrieving lost souls or soul fragments on behalf of patients afflicted with spiritual malaise commonly translated as "soul loss"—in secular terms, a psychological condition characterized by depression, listlessness and an overall lack of will to carry on with life.

Peruvian shamans, or *curanderos*, have traditionally served members of their local communities with the assistance of this highly valued spiritual medicine. Increasingly, though, they are becoming service vendors for an expanding *ayahuasca* market among non-indigenous people. Not only is *ayahuasca* exported around the world, "*ayahuasca* tourism" draws increasing numbers of people from around the globe to South America.

In Peru, *ayahuasca* is recognized as a revered element of that state's indigenous cultural heritage even though its use is not yet technically legal. In some countries, such as Brazil and the U.S., its use is legally restricted to certain religious groups. Due to its increasing popularity, many other countries have started taking notice as to the legal status of the drug. Confounding legislators is the fact that the vine itself has none of the psychoactive substance DMT (N,N-dimethyltryptamine) which gives the tea its potency. The DMT, which is naturally produced by the human body in small amounts, comes from the *chacrana* plant (among many others) that is mixed with the *ayahuasca* vine to produce the tea. When ingested as a tea, DMT is released in significantly greater quantities. The

problem for ayahuasca users is that DMT is classified as a Schedule 1 drug by the UN and is thus restricted to medical and scientific use in most countries.

Unlike some other hallucinogens extracted from the indigenous medicine cabinet, ayahuasca never made it as a recreational drug. So far it has not cracked any major party scenes anywhere. South American drug cartels who saw in ayahuasca a potential bonanza have given up trying to peddle it. It is just too powerful and dangerous. Its proper use requires substantial knowledge and expertise. It is not a drug for a casual hit or high. Many foods must be avoided before its use to prevent serious illness. According to the curanderos, ayahuasca cannot become a party drug because the spiritual component dominates. Those who report positive experiences with ayahuasca speak of it in the most glowing terms of universal connectedness and love—qualities deemed lacking in our complex, urban societies.

Ayahuasca use is rationalized in various ways by the film's subjects. For one person it cured an addiction to heroin. For another it was a way to help solve family strife. For others it was an aid in the quest for greater self-knowledge. Each comes off as utterly genuine and the film thus succeeds in stirring up a great deal of empathy for its subjects.

A most laudable feature of this film is that it lets the images and subjects do all the talking. There is virtually no narrative voice-over. Yet, there is a grand narrative effect due

to subtle direction and adroit editing that leads this viewer to ask many questions. For example, why does the mainstream habitually vilify hallucinogenic drug use even when it is done for spiritual reasons? Is the spiritual versus recreational drug dichotomy valid? Why do people from metropolitan world centres (and not just anthropologists) reach out to indigenous cultures for a cure to their alienation or anomie? Why do they crave Amerindian hallucinogens in particular? Why did Amerindians explore hallucinogens to a far greater extent than old world cultures (a question posed by anthropologist Weston LaBarre in *The Ghost Dance*, his classic book on the origins of religion)? Are indigenous and metropolitan cultures rendered more powerful in combination, just like the two plant ingredients of the ayahuasca brew? How will laws be changed in order to accommodate the changing drug habits of the world?

Though it does not directly answer these questions, this film provides a valuable ethnographic documentary on a contemporary cultural trend that has rapidly become global in scope. *Vine of the Soul* calls into question many reigning assumptions and laws pertaining to drug use and, as such, will remain a relevant documentary for years to come.