

BOOK REVIEW

ALMENDRO, MANUEL (2023). *The Labyrinth of Ayahuasca*. Newcastle upon Tyne, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, i-xxxv, + 458 pp. Hard cover £81.99 (ISBN: 1-5275-0500-6; ISBN13: 978-1-5275-0500-1), Soft cover £40.99 (ISBN: 1-0364-0387-4; ISBN13: 978-1-0364-0387-4). *Reviewed by Douglas A. MacDonald.*

Spanish transpersonal psychologist Manuel Almendro has dedicated a considerable portion of his life and professional career to the authentic study of traditional indigenous medicine (TIM) as practiced by the Navajo, Asháninka, Mazatec, and Cocama peoples. Throughout his time doing this work, he has endeavored to find ways to integrate indigenous teachings with other spiritual systems (particularly Zen), along with psychological theory and research and to do so in a manner that helps to both preserve and advocate for the value of TIM in science and health care. In this book, we are treated to the culmination of Almendro's efforts. *The Labyrinth of Ayahuasca* is an impressively rich and expansive text that showcases his vast erudition about shamanism, psychedelics, anthropology, modern psychology, and consciousness studies. In addition to sharing his scholarship and what he has learned through his first-person study of TIM, Almendro offers analysis and commentary on the work done by other theorists, researchers, and practitioners including coverage of the history and impact of Westerners on native cultures and their healing technologies and traditions.

The book begins with a short preface in which Almendro gives his motivations for writing the book and conveys his hope that the wisdom of ancient traditions will become realized in our times. Thereafter, the reader encounters an engaging foreword by Stanley Krippner, a foundational transpersonal scholar well known for his own inquiry into, and personal exploration of, indigenous spiritualities. Expressing clear positive regard and respect for Almendro's work, Krippner does a superlative job combining his own research and insights with those of Almendro to highlight the myriad themes and facets of the book so as to make coherent and transparent the complexities associated with understanding shamanism and psychedelics and their potential to inform and transform consciousness and the human condition.

The main text opens with an introduction wherein Almendro sets the tenor and tone for the book. In it, he provides an overview of TIM and shamanism (which he refers to as "the path of the native mind") while discussing it in the context of how indigenous people and their healing traditions have garnered the interest of Westerners, some with the intent of honestly studying and learning their ancient wisdom and others who appear eager to appropriate and exploit these traditions for personal, professional, and/or financial gain. Almendro makes clear the importance of preserving the traditions while finding ways to acknowledge and incorporate their knowledge into psychological science and practice.

Following the introduction are 30 chapters that are organized into 10 parts. Part One, entitled *The Shamanic World*, consists of six chapters that delve more deeply into shamanism and provide the reader with a definition and description of its

characteristics as a way of living, learning, knowing, and healing. Interwoven throughout, Almendro discusses the history of, and tension between, shamanism and Western science (and Western culture more generally) and makes his own views unambiguously clear, proffering that Western science and health disciplines have tended to be dismissive and even hostile to the insights and wisdom derived from shamanic traditions.

In Part Two (*On the Path*), Almendro turns to a more granular discussion of the shamanic path in which he blends together his own training in psychology with his direct experiences derived from his studying and learning from indigenous healers. At the same time, he endeavors to place shamanism into a world context by identifying points of parallel and ostensible convergence between it and other non-indigenous systems and practices. Throughout, he continues to offer critical reflections and evaluations of how shamanism has been perceived and used by Western scholars and practitioners.

Sharing the same title as the book, Part Three is among the longest and most informationally substantive sections. Its chapters traverse a wide range of topics ranging from a critical overview of the history of the conquest of the Americas by Europeans and its implications for indigenous peoples to the origins of interest in, and research on, psychedelics and their significance for the understanding of consciousness and spirituality. As an overarching theme, he links native traditions and the use of sacred plants to what has been playing out in Western science and health practice and offers his evaluation of the promise, problems, and perils that face both shamanism and psychedelic studies that comes with their globalized popularization.

In Part Four, called *Ayahuasca: Death and Desolation*, Almendro brings the reader deeper into his assessment of the current state of affairs surrounding shamanism. He is direct in sharing how the growing interest and intrusion of Westerners in the world and lives of indigenous peoples has been contributing to the irresponsible and even destructive use of ayahuasca and questions whether this signals an existential threat to the way of the native mind. He ultimately puts forth a cause to these problems—the disregard of shamanic knowledge that is necessary to best utilize traditional healing practices.

In Part Five, *From Deep Inside the Jungle*, Almendro discusses transmission as an important means through which knowledge is transferred to those training in shamanic traditions but that is often overlooked and ignored by Western scholars. He defines transmission as “. . . the genuine act of passing the timeless knowledge of the master on to the disciple” (p. 278) and likens it to sudden states of awakening found in other spiritual traditions that are made available to pupils when they are deemed ready to receive it. He draws heavily from his own interactions with traditional healers to colorfully illustrate some of the ways in which transmission can occur.

Part Six, entitled *On the Frontiers of Knowledge*, starts with an excellent chapter wherein Almendro shares his experiences learning from shamans while in the

Amazon, effectively illustrating from a first person perspective how transmission works. This chapter is followed with a chapter in which the author offers his reflections on the commercialization and misuse of shamanism and the perils it presents those who engage in its use without adequate foreknowledge, preparation, and commitment. Almendro does not hold back on his criticisms of pop shamanism and what he calls “shamanic neo-colonialism” (p. 316) and forcefully asserts that the potential of TIM to have a positive and lasting legacy is coming under threat by those who are willing to exploit it for their own personal gain. Interestingly and importantly, he presents arguments supporting the potential of science—responsible and respectful science—to aid in the exploration, legitimization, and integration of TIM into modern theory and research.

In Part Seven (*Toward a Holomic Project in Psychology and Psychotherapy*), Almendro builds on his preceding argumentation and in two chapters presents what may be characterized as a paradigmatic and theoretical synthesis of TIM with psychology and psychotherapy that opens up possibilities for exciting programs of research.

For the remaining three parts of the book, Almendro unpacks, clarifies and elaborates upon the ideas presented earlier. Part Eight (*Some First-Person Reports*) provides a detailed recounting of a person’s ayahuasca experiences expressed in the person’s own words. It is a compelling case study that Almendro uses to exemplify how shamanic healing is supposed to work. In Part Nine (*Shamanism in the Third Millennium*), Almendro discusses the current state of TIM, highlighting how and where it may contribute to science and professional practice. Lastly, in Part Ten (*A Holonomic Project*), he formalizes his approach to science and, more specifically, offers a proposal for an applied science based on states of consciousness. He presents in detail the theory underlying the Oxigeme process (an approach to psychotherapy and healing that he has developed and refined) and suggests how this process may be of benefit in furthering science-informed psychotherapy.

As a final element to the book, Almendro includes an appendix containing the Tarapoto Manifesto, a short document outlining the key characteristics of TIM, which advocates for these traditions to “. . . be recognized, protected, studied, and promoted” (p. 425). A link is provided to a website with the manifesto that allows visitors supportive of the ideas and proposals it contains to add their names as signatories.

While its sheer comprehensiveness is appealing, there are two aspects of the book that I particularly appreciate and think will have impact on both research and practice. First is the attention given to ethics as they relate to how shamanism in general (and sacred plants specifically) has been misrepresented, exploited, and/or misused (most commonly, though not exclusively, by those who are non-indigenous). With his assertive discussions of the challenges facing TIM replete throughout the book, Almendro obliges the reader to acknowledge the problems and to reflect on how our actions and motivations, no matter how well intended, may actually cause harm. In order for inquiry on TIM to proceed with integrity, one must give fulsome regard to ethics. Second is Almendro’s strong advocacy for science—offering a range of criticisms of conventional Western science with which

most transpersonalists would agree, he advances several lines of argumentation supporting the need for empirical research and does so in a manner that simultaneously champions the integration of established first and third-person methods while also elevating indigenous systems as avenues for rigorous inquiry on consciousness in their own right. With respect to the latter, I must admit that I have some concerns about the possibility of culture-specific systems such as TIM (or ayurvedic medicine or traditional Chinese medicine) serving as the basis of an open and participatory science in a way that will result in generalizable knowledge accessible to all. However, I am at the same time eager to explore possibilities for how epistemic diversity could contribute to an enrichment of science. As such, I am fully supportive of Almendro's ideas and proposals.

In conclusion, I see this book as a valuable and timely contribution to the scholarly and professional literature on TIM. I have little doubt that it will foster enlivened dialogue and debate among transpersonal researchers and practitioners and will serve as inspiration to help move forward our engagement with indigenous traditions in a manner that facilitates respect, collaboration, and growth.

The Author

Manuel Almendro, Ph.D., is a clinical psychologist and director of Oxigeme, a private school and a process of integration for a psychology and psychotherapy of Consciousness in Barcelona and Madrid, Spain, where he conducts individual and group psychotherapy as well as a research and training program. He holds a European Certificate in Psychology and Psychotherapy (EuroPsy). He is a member of the European Federation of Psychologists' Associations (EFPA) and past founding president of the Spanish Transpersonal Association (ATRE). He is on the editorial boards of the *International Journal of Transpersonal Studies* and the *Journal of Transpersonal Research*. Dr. Almendro is the author of a number of articles and books. Since 1980, he has worked with the Mazateca of Mexico and the Ashaninka and Shipibo-Conibo, Cocamas, of the Peruvian Amazon. In addition, since the 1970s, in Zen Tradition, he is a Dharma Teacher in the tradition of Seung Sahn. As author and editor, his books and articles already have thousands of readers as can be seen on the internet portals. He also conducts seminars with some masters in psychotherapy and meditation introducing innovative psychotherapeutic methods. The triad clinical psychology, Zen tradition and indigenous traditional medicine mark the line of working and research of Oxigeme. Based in Spain, Dr. Almendro also lectures and conducts workshops throughout Europe and South America. Correspondence should be addressed to Manuel Almendro via e-mail at almen@oxigeme.com.

The Reviewer

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