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Interviews

# Interview with Hillary S. Webb

Posted by [PsypressUK](#) · August 17, 2012 · [Leave a Comment](#)

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*Hillary S. Webb is an anthropologist and author who has recently written '[Yanantin and Masintin: Complimentary Dualism in the Andean World](#)'. She's been kind enough to answer some of PsypressUK's questions on her experiences of Peru and some of the elements of her excellent psychospiritual book.*

**Your psychospiritual journey in Yanantin and Masintin in the Andean World was a particularly interesting narrative because, rather than simply being an affirmation, or reaffirmation of a social faith, which is so often described, you placed a cosmological and philosophical concept at the heart of your journey; a concept that was at once both academically and ontologically alien to you when you embarked on the project. What does it mean to experience yanantin on San Pedro? And to what extent has the experience, under an academic context, influenced you as an individual in your beliefs and understandings?**

Well, in the book I tell the story of being an eager PhD student going to Peru to study this concept of yanantin or “complementary opposites” and its role as the philosophical basis of the indigenous Andean worldview. This vision of the world as being made up of “complementary,” rather than “antagonistic,” polarities had really gripped me on both a personal and intellectual level, but trying to be a dutiful doctoral student, my original intent was to focus on it entirely as an intellectual endeavor. I planned to do a traditional ethnography, full of facts and figures and definitions that would lead me to a basic “theory” about how indigenous Peruvians experience the world as a dance of opposites as opposed to the “battle” approach so prevalent in the Western worldview. But when I arrived in Peru for my first fieldwork trip, I met with a young shaman, who I call Amado. I opened up my notebook and said to him, “How do you define yanantin?” He kind of smiled at me and then said, “Out of respect I do not define yanantin. May I suggest that you download the information from the cosmos instead?” How I came to interpret this was that rather than relying on definitions and intellectual understandings, I needed to have an experience of yanantin by going into ceremony with the mescaline cactus San Pedro, which has been a

psycho-spiritual tool within this culture for thousands of years.

In the first few chapters of the book I go into detail about the mental wrangling I went through before I finally decided to take him up on this offer. And, wow, thank goodness I did. Because he was right. Despite my initial personal fear and intellectual doubt, with the help of San Pedro I was able to have a deeply embodied and profoundly meaningful experience in which I was able to step outside of my firmly entrenched “habits of mind” and see the world through the lens of complementarity. It was brilliant and beautiful and truly paradigm shifting, both on personal and professional levels.

What does it mean to experience yanantin on San Pedro? For me it was having a taste of a state in which antagonistic divisions of right and wrong, the splendidness and savageness of self and world, lost their traction. They lost their necessity. They lost their ontological appeal as a way of making meaning of the world and my role within the world. Like many psychedelics, San Pedro has the exquisite ability to open one up to a kind of “neutral zone” in which all those rigid polarities that we create for ourselves on a daily basis drop away and we get to recreate the world. Or, at least, we get to recreate our relationship to the world. And maybe those two are the same thing.

Speaking as an academic, my work with San Pedro brought with it increased respect for non-ordinary ways of knowing; for the tangible, valid, and highly practical information that can be accessed within altered states, whether that be through psychedelic use, shamanic journeying, chanting, or any other means of entering into a non-ordinary states of awareness. On a personal level ... gosh, where do I even begin with that? All I can say simply is that having a subjective, integrated experience of yanantin has resulted in me being a more relaxed, happier person; one who can more easily dance with the tensions of existence and more easily laugh at this quirky human experience that all of us walking round on the planet are engaging with every day. So, to me, it is to our great shame and detriment that, due to stigma and legalization issues, psychedelics are a tool that we are denied use of in Western culture. Because there are marvels and wisdom to be found there.

**Did you have any experience with psychedelic plants or substances prior to using San Pedro? And, if so, did these in any way prepare you for what you experienced in Peru when researching yanantin?**

I had experience in the sense that in my twenties I played around with a couple different psychedelics and then later in life had what I consider a “homeopathic” dose of ayahuasca. But, for the most part, my prior work in the field of consciousness studies had been with shamanic journeying, ecstatic breath work, experimenting with various sound technologies as a means of inducing altered states—that kind of thing. So I did have prior experience accessing the “wild mind.” I knew things were likely to get weird. I knew that in order to have the experience I craved I needed to let go of any kind of certainty and rationality and desire to be in control of the contents of my own mind and just let the San Pedro have its way with me.

Compared to that more recreational psychedelic use, what distinguishes my experience with San Pedro in ceremonial context is that each of the prior experiences had taken place in what I would call a “non-intentional” context. In other words, I was hanging out with friends and someone happened to have a bag of mushrooms and it was Friday, and we were bored. We had fun, sure, but in this context not much of the experience was particularly useful to us beyond the few hours that we were under its influence. Nothing was integrated in a way that it could be used to enhance our non-stoned life. Nothing was learned or healed. In contrast, when going into ceremony with Amado and my other research participants, a very intentional teaching space was created and therefore the experience resulted in very positive effects that have lasted far beyond the duration of the “trip.”

To me, this is key. I have become an advocate for the use of various altered states as a way to attain personal and professional knowledge. And when I say that I’m referring to the use of these tools in a very specific, very intentional context. This is not to say that there isn’t something to be gained getting together with friends on a Friday night—I know many people who have had profound revelations in this context and I certainly don’t want to discount that. But speaking personally and professionally, I do feel that working with a “professional” in some sort of intentional context is where it’s at—both for safety sake and for maximizing the potential of these states.

**You wrote: “It is noteworthy that the New Age movement, having borrowed many of its beliefs, symbols, and practices from indigenous cultures, and then combined them with other teachings from around the world, has brought these beliefs back to Cuzco in a new, regurgitated, and reimagined form” (Webb 5). You then go on to suggest that the inclusive nature of Andean ideology was one factor in your recognising the complimentary dualism of yanantin within it. Do you think the New Age movement has an essential element within itself, or that it is in fact rather a matrix of other ideologies?**

Hmmmm ... yeah. That’s one of those questions that you may get a different answer from me if you ask me again in an hour from now! So much depends on perspective and what part of the movement you gravitate towards. My basic feeling is that “New Age” isn’t so much a spiritual tradition in and of itself, but rather is a meeting ground for seeking individuals who are called to ask questions like, “How do we best engage with the world around us?” “The world within us?” “The world beyond us?” We’re sorting through a variety of belief systems and teachings in order to see which ones make the most sense for our lives. From that perspective, that it is a matrix of ideologies is its “essential element.” The coalescing element is the search and, ideally, a vehicle for openness to new ways of being and engaging. And the diversity of ideologies within it supports that mission.

I think it’s because I see the New Age movement as a wonderful opportunity to seek for new ways of being that I find myself irritated with certain aspects of it that have become just as fundamentalist and holier-than-thou and non-self-reflective in a critical thinking sense as any religious or scientific system that the movement claims it wants to move beyond. I’m getting a little off-topic here, so I won’t go on about it, but just to say that in my opinion the

New Age movement is, at its best, a wonderful opportunity to explore our relationship to the cosmos, but that we have just as much potential to fall into the trap of seeing one small piece of the equation and deciding that we have solved the whole mystery. I think what's called for is a delicate balance of openness and rigor in the sense of, "Ok, what else might this experience mean?" To continually return to the quest and the questioning.

**In one of my favourite passages in your book, in the chapter *Of Time and Space*, you write: "*History is a line with no going backward, only forward, my Spanish teacher's brother had told me. But in a spiral you can go forward and backward. It repeats, It renews. It is reversible. Within that spiral you can renew yourself. You can renew the world. Infinitely*" (Webb 60). In many respects, for me, this line encapsulated many themes and threads in the book. The academic journey so far as you delved deeper into examples of complimentary dualism; the psychospiritual so far as the self is undergoing a constant state of renewal. To what extent do you think there is a lesson in this model for the Western approach to history, and more deeply, ontology?**

That's a lovely reflection. Really. I think you're right, that the idea of renewal and circling back on yourself is a recurring theme in Yanantin and Masintin. In the last chapter of the book I describe my final San Pedro journey, in which I find myself moving backwards in time, returning to the beginning, revisiting the various rhythms of this yanantin journey. And at that point recognizing that there is no end to the story. That's a very Western view in my experience, this impulse to have every "story" tied up in neat bows, whether that is our personal story or the desire to uncover the ultimate answer to life, the universe, and everything. Instead, the book does not end with me having some ultimate Revelation or one Great Insight that makes everything clear once and for all. I certainly don't arrive at some sort of psycho-spiritual-intellectual perfection surrounding this idea of yanantin, but rather in a place where I stopped struggling for resolution. That place, I discovered, is both scary and wonderful.

As for what lesson this might hold for the Western approach to history ... Well, in the West we tend to have a linear, teleological vision of history as a constant progression, with constant progress, all leading towards some absolute endpoint in which some sort of singularity is achieved—whether that be the triumph of good over evil, or the arrival at some kind of ultimate theory of everything. It's a reductionist model that is uncomfortable with complexity and messiness. Within the indigenous Andean perspective, on the other hand, history is seen as a constant renewal and rebalancing. Amado once told me, "Here in the Andes we don't have a creation story because creation is happening every day." And if every day there is creation, then in order for that to happen there must be constant endings as well. And that kind of cyclical-spiral model really resonates for me. That's where the tension of constant beginnings and endings becomes responsible for the elegance of the dance.

**There is an increasingly populated, and reported, cultural exchange going on between the Amazon and the West that revolves around the use of psychedelic plants and**

**psychospiritual healing. As someone who straddles both the academic and personal aspects of this cultural exchange, what do you think the effect of this will be for the future two cultures?**

I have no idea. Really, no clue at all. Like anything else, this exchange will come with a mixed bag of outcomes, both positive and negative—however you want to define those terms. Probably it'll be a mix of both. I don't know what the effect will be, but I do know that I support this exchange, despite—or maybe because of—the potential impacts on each culture. As an anthropologist and as a human being, what gets me passionate about this exchange is that here we have an opportunity to ask each other, “How do you see the world and yourselves?” “How do you navigate certain ‘problems’ of existence?” Because, while our culture may have run out of ideas for how to respond to a certain practical or existential problem, another culture may come at it from an angle at which the “problem” is not a problem at all! Through engaging with other cultures we have an opportunity to shed light on our human condition and find ways of easing our personal and collective suffering. That is most certainly what I found in my work with the complementary worldview of Peru. Having these exchanges with Amado and the rest, suddenly places where I was stuck—emotionally, intellectually—became unstuck. Small revelations occurred that filled me with joy and peace and optimism. And, similarly, Amado and the others had an opportunity to look at their worldview anew, through my eyes, and in doing so gain new perspective and insight for their own lives. And that got them very excited. Being in ceremony together, laughing together, crying together, a dialectic process occurred in which our two perspectives came together and created something new; a “third thing” that was greater than either of the two perspectives separately. What a miracle! This fills me with great hope for the future that we are all creating together.

**Finally, do you have any plans to continue your research into Andean philosophy, cosmology and botanicals in the future?**

At the moment, I don't have plans to continue my research in Peru. But, you know, it's funny—when I made my first trip there in 2000 I enjoyed it very much, but I didn't have any overwhelming impulse to return. But over the last eleven years, life has brought me back there over and over again, in a variety of different roles and for a variety of different reasons. Apparently Peru and I have some karma to work out! So even though I find myself wanting to move in other directions, it may well be that there's more exploration to be done there. But regardless, my work and life's passion is about exploring non-ordinary states of consciousness and investigating how various cultures dance with the world around them and, in particular, how they relate to the enigmatic phenomenon of human consciousness. The reoccurring question for me on both a personal and professional level is, “What more is there, beyond our current understanding of reality?” And there are so many ways of stepping into that question. So what specifically the next project will look like, I'm not sure, but I doubt I'll ever get too far away from that central quest.

## About PsypressUK

Rob Dickins is currently the editor of the Psychedelic Press UK, and is undertaking an English literature research masters, with the University of Exeter. The topic of his thesis is the proliferation of psychedelic literature between 1954-1964, dealing primarily with texts on the psychotherapeutic use of LSD and other hallucinogens.

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