



Psychedelic Atmospheric

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ABSTRACT:

This paper develops the concept of “psychedelic atmospheric,” exploring how space and environment play crucial roles in shaping the mood and atmosphere within various psychedelic healing settings. Central is the idea that psychedelics are not just mood-enhancing molecules but are significantly influenced by their surroundings. Drawing on ethnographic research in ayahuasca drinking settings in shamanic tourism Peru and neo-shamanic Australia, this work explores the roles of materialities at the interplay between physical settings and mood and atmosphere in psychedelic healing spaces. It examines how each space’s socio-cultural and cosmological significances intertwine with psychedelic experiences to modulate mood and atmosphere. Psychedelic atmospheric provides a framework for understanding the intricate assemblages of sensory, spatial, environmental, and cosmological/meaning factors that can shape the different moods and atmospheres of psychedelic healing. The paper also considers when psychedelic healing atmospheres become unsettled, break down, and transmogrify.

Introduction

The spaces where psychedelic experiences unfold are never neutral. Whether in dense forests, urban retreats, or clinical settings, these environments shape how psychedelic senses and emotions are experienced. I propose “psychedelic atmospheric” as a concept to explore the affective and perceptual experience of different settings of psychedelic usage. Psychedelic atmospheric offers a lens for understanding the entanglement of materialities, spaces, and environments with cosmological and cultural realities in catalyzing psychedelic experiences. Atmospheric elements can actively shape the psychedelic sessions by guiding, amplifying, or even challenging the visionary and affective qualities that emerge following ingestion. Recognizing the significance of these elements opens new avenues for both ethnographic inquiry and practical considerations for therapy, spirituality, and research.

Cultural traditions across the planet recognize the importance of special environments when consuming the substances, including the Navajo wombed *tee-pee*,¹ the Tukanooan

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Header image: Oil paintings of Jesus and Kali by the Quechuan artist Ruvexan Flores, 2019, overlaid at an evening ceremony at Pachamama Temple, outside Yarinacocha, Peru, 2019

¹ Joseph D. Calabrese, “Reflexivity and Transformation Symbolism in the Navajo Peyote Meeting,” *Ethos* 22, no. 4 (1994): 494-527.

celestial *maloca* or hut,² neoshamanic *circles* in Australia,³ living room-like experiments at Johns Hopkins University,⁴ or the exiled vibes of psychedelic, electronic dance festivals.⁵ While pharmaceutical companies and mainstream psychiatry often present psychoactive substance effects as universal, social scientists have illustrated how they are significantly shaped by “set and setting”—a framework developed by researchers like Norman Zinberg,⁶ and further expanded by Ido Hartogsohn and others.⁷ “Set” refers to the user’s beliefs, expectations, and psychological state, while “setting” encompasses the physical, social, and cultural environment in which the substance is consumed. This dynamic interplay between individual mindset and situational context is understood as “extra pharmacological variables” in scientific literature.⁸ As Nicolas Langlitz described, some of the variables that shape psychedelic experiences “might be pharmacogenetic or neurophysiological, but others might have to do with how people understand what’s happening to them—and these understandings change historically and differ across cultures.”⁹ Hartogsohn introduced the notion of a “collective set and setting,”¹⁰ arguing that broader societal and cultural features create an overarching context that shapes expectations and responses to drug use. Such collective contexts can attune and modulate the emotional and perceptual experiences of users, ideologically guiding psychoactive effects—for instance, whether psychedelics are used for healing war trauma in the United States,¹¹ improving business strategies in China,¹² or encountering ecological ancestors in the stars in Amazonia.¹³

While the “drug, set, and setting” framework offers a broad understanding of how individual mindset and environmental and cultural context help to shape psychedelic experiences, the concept of psychedelic atmospheres provides a richer qualitative lens by focusing on the felt, perceived, and situated qualities of experience. Affective atmospheres, as explored below, involve the embodied sensations and emotions that permeate spaces and environments. This framework is narrower than setting and setting. It enables an emphasis on how atmospheres, vibes, and collective moods are not just backgrounds but are embodied elements of world making—whether cultural, ancestral, environmental, political, or other—that are emergent in the unfolding of consciousness.

² Gerardo Reichel-Dolmatoff, *Rainforest shamans: Essays on the Tukano Indians of the Northwest Amazon* (Themis Books, 1997).

³ Alex Gearin, *Global Ayahuasca: Wondrous Visions and Modern Worlds* (Stanford University Press, 2024).

⁴ Tehseen Noorani, “Containment Matters: Set and Setting in Contemporary Psychedelic Psychiatry,” *Philosophy, Psychiatry, & Psychology* 28, no. 3 (2021): 201–216.

⁵ Graham St. John, “The Vibe of the Exiles: Aliens, Afropsychedelia, and Psycculture,” *Dancecult: Journal of Electronic Dance Music Culture* 5, no. 2 (2013): 56–87.

⁶ Norman E. Zinberg, *Drug, Set, and Setting: The Basis for Controlled Intoxicant Use* (Yale University Press, 1984).

⁷ Ido Hartogsohn, *American Trip: Set, Setting, and the Psychedelic Experience in the Twentieth Century* (MIT Press, 2020).

⁸ Robin L. Carhart-Harris et al., “Psychedelics and the Essential Importance of Context,” *Journal of Psychopharmacology* 32, no. 7 (2018): 725–731.

⁹ Nicolas Langlitz, “The Paradoxes of Psychedelic Humanities,” In *Palgrave Handbook of Philosophy and Psychoactive Drug Use*, ed. Rob Lovering (Palgrave Macmillan, 2024), 287.

¹⁰ Hartogsohn, *American Trip*, 2.

¹¹ Gearin, *Global Ayahuasca*, 221.

¹² Gearin, *Global Ayahuasca*, 167.

¹³ Gerardo Reichel-Dolmatoff, *Rainforest Shamans: Essays on the Tukano Indians of the Northwest Amazon* (Themis Books, 1997).

An Ethnographic Montage

Providing some avenues into thinking about psychedelic atmospheres, I present a brief montage of ethnographic encounters. During the winter of 2019, at Pachamama Temple in the Peruvian Amazon, I sat on a worn single-person mattress on the wooden ground of a large *maloca* hut with a dozen other international visitors, each on their own bed, about to be served ayahuasca from Shipibo healers. Working at the temple, the healers were experts in conducting ceremonies for visitors. They entered the *maloca*, giggling and joking with each other, generating a warm and jovial ambiance, as they typically did. Amazonian psychedelic usage has tended to be more chaotic and exuberant and less orderly and “ritualized” than anthropologists have acknowledged.¹⁴ At Pachamama Temple, the Shipibo healers had adapted their ancestral practices to suit the expectations of the visiting guests, bringing a more generic order and structure to their performances and songs, shaping the ceremonial atmosphere with attention to intercultural dynamics.¹⁵

Everyone was getting comfortable for the night’s ceremony. The *maloca* walls, which had mosquito netting or wooden panels, entailed a series of large oil paintings of animal and plant spirits, gods from world religions, and psychedelic *kené* designs, encasing the ceremony space within a hybrid cosmology typical of New Age and neoshamanic spiritualities. Right before we were to drink ayahuasca, a young man from England approached me cautiously through the darkness, vulnerability in his eyes. He asked if we could swap positions, explaining that he was directly under a painting of Jesus—appearing, at least to me, to be a serene, levitating figure radiating grace and love. The guest later told me his upbringing in England had fostered in him an unshakeably critical view of Christianity.

He came to Peru to heal his depression, and he had just stopped taking SSRI medication, which he had been prescribed for over a decade. He seemed genuinely unsettled by the Jesus painting. He later confided to me that the painting negatively affected his ability to receive the *icaro* songs during his first ceremony at the temple, leading to intense fear, haunting visions, vomiting, and trembling—creating a contagious mood that affected others nearby him in the space.

I found it funny that he wanted to change seating positions, for I was located underneath an intense painting of Kali, the Hindu goddess, in her fierce form, associated with violence, destruction, and rebirth. Her blue body contrasted against dark red figures and a fiery background. She held a decapitated head dripping blood, evoking shock and horror. But, some guests regarded the image as protective and transformative. While finding this moment comical, given he preferred to journey under the watchful eye of a wrathful Hindu goddess rather than a loving depiction of Jesus, the example demonstrates the powerful agency of materialities, objects, and art within psychedelic atmospheres.

Emotions and atmospheres are not as distinct as they may initially appear. Hermann Schmitz developed an atmospheric theory of emotions to overcome what he saw as an enduring mistake in ancient Greek thought that located emotions inside the person. Placing emotions solely in the interior of minds and bodies, he argued, made emotions closer to reason and more amenable to control. The idea that emotions occur inside the person is pervasive in modern industrial societies, where the idea is reproduced through popular psychology today. A more accurate view, according to Schmitz, is that emotions, whether anger, shame, or joy, are “poured out” into spaces, saturating objects and persons alike, generating distinct atmospheres.¹⁶ In parallel, Ben Anderson suggested that affective atmospheres are “not

¹⁴ Michael Taussig, *Shamanism, Colonialism, and the Wild Man: A Study in Terror and Healing* (University of Chicago Press, 1987), 443.

¹⁵ Gearin, *Global Ayahuasca*, 87.

¹⁶ Hermann Schmitz, *New phenomenology: A brief introduction* (Mimesis International, 2019), 22.

reducible to the individual bodies that they emerge from” but are shaped by human and nonhuman materialities and environments that surround bodies and exert a force that breaks down the subjective and the objective, that dissolve the interior of the person and the exterior of their surroundings...¹⁷

Affective Atmospheres

Understanding affective atmospheres requires attending to their indeterminacy, their so-called vagueness. These atmospheres are not objects like cars, chairs, or white blood cells that can be measured in determinate ways; yet they are “singular,” Anderson writes,¹⁸ in the sense of singularly knowing the celebratory feeling of a birthday party, the collective sadness of a funeral, or the electric sensation before a massive storm breaks. Affective atmospheres are collective, and they are transmitted between human people and environments, objects, and nonhuman subjectivities. This theorization of affective atmospheres displays some wondrous similarities to descriptions of psychedelic phenomenology that emphasize boundary-blurring between people and their surroundings, whether that blurring is described as ego dissolution, becoming one with the environment, or shapeshifting to the point of view of an animal, plant, or god.

To distinguish the key concepts of affective atmospheres, environments, and atmospherics in the context of psychedelic usage, it is useful to define how each relates to the experience of space and mood. Affective atmospheres are the emotional tones that arise within a space, shaped by the interactions between people, objects, more-than-humans, and their surroundings. These atmospheres are fluid, often felt collectively, and are not confined to individuals. Environments refer to the physical and material aspects of the setting—architecture, natural landscapes, objects, and sensory elements. While environments provide the container, affective atmospheres emerge through lived and felt interactions within these spaces.

Atmospherics, we can say, is the broader concept that includes both affective atmospheres and environments but emphasizes how these elements are intentionally or unintentionally orchestrated to influence mood and perception. A defining feature of psychedelics is their capacity to enhance and augment these atmospherics, amplifying emotional tones, deepening sensory engagement with environments, and bringing the orchestrated or emergent qualities of atmospheres into sharp focus. This influence on atmospherics involves aspects that are unique to the psychopharmacological properties of psychedelics, making the substances powerful mediators and augmenters that resonate between or through bodies and their environments and settings.

Arriving for fieldwork in Peru after completing a study on neoshamanic ayahuasca groups in Australia, I immediately sensed the different atmosphere at the Shipibo ceremonies. These ceremonies, characterized by a jovial and dramatic approach, contrasted starkly with the settings in Australia. The Shipibo-led sessions were situated in a space between the dense Amazon rainforest and the sprawling urban landscapes of San Jose and Yarinacocha. This liminal zone, occurring after dark, entangled ecological and anthropogenic elements, where the sounds of cicadas, frogs, and birds merged with the distant hum of motor vehicles, barking dogs, and the occasional bass of reggaeton and other music from nearby neighborhoods.

Australian neoshamanic ceremonies, in contrast, were deliberately located in remote natural environments away from cities and urban spaces. These environments often accommodated serious and contemplative attitudes, accompanied by ambient and consoling music, more comfortable materialities such as thick mattresses, pillows, ornamental rug-

¹⁷ Ben Anderson, “Affective Atmospheres,” *Emotion, Space, and Society* 2, no. 2 (2009): 80.

¹⁸ Anderson, “Affective Atmospheres,” 79.

covered floors, hot-water showers, and wifi: features aligning closely with the cultural and physical proximities of the participants' everyday lives. These participants often perceived cities and urban environments as settings that would pose spiritual and psychological risks to drinking ayahuasca, interfering with the healing capacities of Mother Ayahuasca or leading to psychospiritual distress. Mother Nature—wounded, mysterious, powerful—was sometimes described as a sister or mirror of Mother Ayahuasca who healed urban ills, critiquing mainstream Australian life.¹⁹ This healing cosmology is supported by the sensory and therapeutic atmospheres of natural ecologies. One prominent Australian facilitator, a white male called Darpan, described how ayahuasca purges purify the individual psyche in the same way that Gaia, in response to climate change, is “overheating” to cleanse the planet of toxic human societies, causing inner hurricanes, volcanoes, and earthquakes, all toward a rebirth into a golden age.²⁰ Anti-establishment values emerged in the entanglement between the visionary and the bodily ayahuasca purge, with the presence of nature purifying the person from social ills. These kinds of ideas permeated bodies, experiences, and narratives at many ayahuasca retreats I attended in the country from 2011 to 2015.

The Shipibo maestros I drank with in Peru came at things differently. In this setting, there was always one healer who stayed in the middle of the *maloca* space to protect the healers and guests—who were situated around the perimeter of the space—from external sorcery attacks. Compared to the wondrous and mystifying mood of the healing *icaros* that the maestros sang to the guests, the protector-shaman's songs in the middle of the space were sometimes emotionally strained under the weight of competitive sorcery, expressing agony and triumph or relief, bringing local issues of urban politics and ambient poverty into the feeling of the ceremony space.²¹ The giant anaconda of one maestro lived under the maloca and was summoned during ceremonies as a protector, while other maestros were visited by plant and other ally spirits who shaped their healing songs directed towards guests. These more-than-human persons are agents of healing, sorcery, or protection that can shape the atmosphere of the ceremonies.

To conclude, some psychedelic enthusiasts have argued that with a sufficiently high dose of psychedelics, the setting becomes irrelevant, thus discounting the importance of space and environment beyond basic safety and comfort measures. In this view, participants may arrive at intense experiences akin to what the late Kilindi Iyi called the “interdimensional village.”²² While this perspective is curious, the so-called heroic doses advocated by figures like Terence McKenna are not for every person or circumstance. Even at such high dosages, the influence of psychedelic atmospherics may not be negated. The importance of atmospheric elements may, in fact, be amplified with increased dosage as the intensity renders the person more sensitive to their surroundings.

The concept of psychedelic atmospherics offers a lens for interpreting and contextualizing psychedelic usage. The ethnographic data discussed here—ranging from neoshamanic circles in Australia to Shipibo-led ceremonies in Peru—demonstrates how environmental surroundings and cultural elements can profoundly influence emotion, visionary experience, and mood. In these contexts, atmospheres act not merely as backdrops but as active elements, agents, or presences that guide and catalyze the psychedelic journey.

¹⁹ Gearin, *Global Ayahuasca*, 158.

²⁰ Alex Gearin, “Ayahuasca Neoshamanism as Cultural Critique in Australia,” in *The World Ayahuasca Diaspora: Reimventions and Controversies*, ed. B. Labate, C. Cavnar, and A. Gearin (Routledge, 2016), 125.

²¹ Gearin, *Global Ayahuasca*, 1.

²² Kilindi Iyi, “High-Dose Mushrooms Beyond the Threshold” Talk given at Breaking Conventions, University of Greenwich, July 12-14, 2013, posted May 21, 2019, by Breaking Convention, YouTube, https://youtu.be/ejdKeghBhNs?si=PHhKQW3UyY5TPT_c.

Future research could apply this framework to diverse settings, expanding the scope of psychedelic studies. Exploring the intersections between psychedelic atmospheres and political or moral world-making practices could shed light on how certain groups use these experiences for collective healing, resistance, or spiritual renewal,²³ paying attention to their rich influence on the multisensoriality of spatially extended emotions.²⁴ Ultimately, psychedelic atmospherics invite us to think, feel, and see beyond the substance alone, encouraging a more integrated and holistic approach to both the study and practice of psychedelics.

²³ Nicolas Langlitz, “The making of a mushroom people: Toward a moral anthropology of psychedelics beyond hype and anti-hype,” *Anthropology Today* 29, no. 3 (2023):10-12.

²⁴ Patrick Eisenlohr, “Atmospheres: The multisensoriality of spatially extended emotions,” *Ethos* 52 (2023): 37-50.