

Ayahuasca, Alpha, and Theta Waves

Abstract Eight channels of EEG from 12 volunteers participating in a workshop in Brazil were recorded under field conditions before and after a shamanistic ritual in which the psychoactive tea, ayahuasca, was consumed. Following three doses of the tea, the subjects showed strong and statistically significant increases of both EEG alpha (8-13Hz) and theta (4-8Hz) mean amplitudes compared to baseline while beta (13-20Hz) amplitudes were unchanged. The strongest increases of alpha activity were observed in the occipital lobes while alpha was unchanged in the frontal lobes. Theta amplitudes, on the other hand, were significantly increased in both occipital and frontal areas. Our data do not support previous findings of cortical activation with decreased alpha and increased beta activity caused by psychedelics (e.g. LSD, mescaline, psilocybin). They rather point to a similarity between the altered states produced by ayahuasca and marijuana which also stimulates the brain to produce more alpha waves. We suggest that these findings of increased EEG alpha and theta activity after drinking ayahuasca reflect an altered state of consciousness. In this state the subjects reported increased awareness of their subconscious processes. This is an altered state comparable to, however more profound than, the meditative state. Our results suggest that ingesting Ayahuasca may provide individuals with increased access to subconscious processes and feelings while in a wakeful, relaxed state. Thus, Ayahuasca has the potential to become a potent tool in the process of psychotherapy.

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