



Conscious Life presents

Indigenous Reciprocity: Equity in Psychedelics

Guest: Dr Beatriz Caiuby Labate

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[00:00:13] Alexander Beiner

Our next guest is Bea Labate. She holds a PhD in social anthropology, and her main areas of interest are the study of plant medicines, drug policy, shamanism, and social justice. She is an executive director of the Chacruna Institute for Psychedelic Plant Medicines, and she serves as the public education and culture specialist for the Multi-disciplinary Association for Psychedelic Studies. Bea, welcome.

Dr Beatriz Caiuby Labate

Hi. It's nice to be here. Thanks for having me.

Alexander Beiner

Yeah, it's great to connect again. Bea, I thought it might be a good place to start to just get a sense of the ways in which modern psychedelic science has its roots in indigenous communities and practices. Maybe you could talk about that a little bit.

Dr Beatriz Caiuby Labate

Yeah, I think a lot of research still needs to be done, but there's definitely a continuity between the underground and the world of psychedelic-assisted therapies and the above ground. A lot of the things that are this modern, contemporary, psychedelic culture, a lot of concepts, come directly from underground circles that also borrowed things and exchanged with shamanic practices. A lot of the concepts have influence on indigenous rituals.

Some of the researchers that championed the research in the '60s sat in native circles. Also, a lot of the therapists that work on psychedelic therapies have practices in the underground. The

underground has been a great source for this world of psychedelic therapies. I think that these formats... Of course, they borrow from multiple sources and different kinds of therapies, different historical periods, different locations. There's not just one location, and there's also practices that come strictly from the West and are not informed by indigenous shamanism.

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But for sure, a lot of the concepts that permeate the field as a whole come from native communities. The very idea that these plants are beings that have some wisdom that are able to activate intelligent parts that in a way have a subjectivity that is very influenced by the idea of shamanism. The idea that these plants heal and that you are going to have a altar or a solemn relationship, that you need to have a certain setting.

A whole ethnography, a whole cartography, a whole map is the project of multiple minds and yet needs to be done. There's a lot of gaps. But in general, I think it's well-known that we didn't invent the wheel, that we're continuing things that ancestors and other traditions started before us.

Alexander Beiner

I'm curious as well, what led you into this area? You run one... Maybe the foremost charity in the psychedelic space focused on these issues. What was your trajectory and journey to getting where you are now?

Dr Beatriz Caiuby Labate

I, like many others that are in the psychedelic field, have tried psychedelics. In my late 19s, early 20s, while I was backpacking Mexico as a young anthropologist, doing a mix of adventures and field work and life experimentations. Got to eat peyote and eat mushrooms and also tried LSD and visited the ruins. And got in touch with other places, other times, other ways of seeing the world. Other cultures, other traditions, other concepts of nature and culture, other languages, other foods.

My passion for psychedelics have always been intertwined with my passion for culture, for tradition, for the beauty of these rituals. The ceremonies, the depth, the ways that sociability and language and territory are all interconnected. These rituals that mix therapy and spirituality and connection to other people, to a feeling that you belong to a larger whole, to the planet. That the planet is alive. That the Earth deserves attention.

It has always been a process hand-in-hand. My curiosity for the altered states of consciousness and the trips to these other realms with my interest for other cultures that have been using this sacred plant since time immemorial and that had other ways of understanding reality that were different than Western, modern, or postmodern, or whatever you want to call the contemporary cultures we live in.

That seemed to have other values. Of course, not all of them are perfect. It's important not to romanticize and to think that this is all good and we are all lost and we try to be indigenous. There's a lot of points that I feel good about being in contemporary cultures, Western ones.

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But for sure, there's a lot to learn and there's a lot to inspire us to think of different ways of being and understanding time and space and relationship between genders and with our ancestors and the invisible world. It has always been a journey of exploring both things.

Also, my intellectual curiosity was very inspired by my spirituality and vice versa. My spiritual interest has informed my interest in research and reading and doing field work and asking questions and trying to go to places and hang out with people and that sort of thing.

Alexander Beiner

Yeah, I think there's some really great points in there I want to touch on. One of them is the idea that there's so many different types of community with different cultures who use psychedelics. You know, indigenous communities. And I think very often we can fall into the trap of assuming there's just one homogenous indigenous group of people who use psychedelics, and I've seen that narrative a few times.

But even with that being said, from the cultures you're aware of, that do use psychedelics or have used them throughout history, are there any particular themes that you see coming out in their value systems or cosmologies that you think we should really be aware of in the West?

Dr Beatriz Caiuby Labate

Well, I think just the whole classification between nature and culture. What is animate and what is inanimate. And this very foundational idea that we have that man is on the top of the chain and we are superior and we are the only one, mankind, that has intentions or personality or agency. And that we are the only rational species and we are able to control and dominate the other species and nature. That nature and other species don't have any intelligent life like we do, and that we are somehow superior, and it's up to us to control nature and to make it serve our purposes, and that nature is there to fulfill our needs.

I think this whole concept that other species have also intention and life, personality, agency, ability to have plans or are agents like we are. And that if you are able to communicate with them, you can learn from that wisdom and you can acquire other kinds of knowledge. We have an emphasis on the rational, on being vigilant and awake and having this materiality, objectivity, rationality.

I think a lot of... I have focused more on the Americas in my studies. We talk about Amerindian perspectives that consider sacred plants like beings, like agents, as human as we are in essence. Rivers and rocks and animals and other species are also full of intention and life, and have their own idiosyncrasies like we do. This is a very important general concept.

Then the other concept is, I think that healing is really more of a holistic affair. We tend to reduce disease, like one molecule helps to treat one disease. I'll extract and synthesize this one molecule and make a pill of it, and that's specifically for this disease. Whereas you can make a generalization that a lot of traditional indigenous cultures have a more holistic understanding of healing.

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So healing is... Of course, there is the physical dimension and the properties, but it also involves a larger set of relationships, the relationship you have with your own self, the relationship you have with your kin, with your community, with this larger collective. And the relationship you have with the world beyond, or the invisible world, or the world of the ancestors, or the world of the dead.

The world that is not apparent, but to which... According to many cultures, is the world that actually guides this world and influences the course of this world. Through having these experiences, you can communicate with that on the level of reality. Also this idea that we are connected to the Earth and we are part of it, and the planet also deserves healing and is part of our healing.

This interconnectedness, this communication of levels, this inter-relatedness among things. This web of life that is all interconnected. I think this is something that is predominant in a lot of cultures and guide the ways that we take sacred plants and how we should use them. These are some of the points that I think are really important through different traditions.

Alexander Beiner

Yeah, it just strikes me listening to you lay that out. There's such a difference between somebody going to, let's say, a psychotherapist to deal with their trauma. Someone they've never met before, and then engaging in a process where they're building a relationship. Then let's say they take, for example, MDMA and engage in some MDMA therapy. Or let's say they take psilocybin and have a psilocybin journey.

I think our view in the West of where the healing is coming from seems quite different, and I wonder how accurate it is, frankly. But for us, it's like, okay, the healing is coming from the experience, but it's also that therapeutic relationship between the therapist and the person. I think from what I understand of a lot of shamanic traditions and what you're talking about, that might be the case with a shaman.

But it seems very much that it's the relationship with the plant and the world that it opens up. So the various entities and spirits and guides and helpers that are there. Do you feel there's a clash between those things? Or let's say, how do you see those two things coming together? Is there a way to synthesize those two? Because they're very different worldviews.

Dr Beatriz Caiuby Labate

There's a lot of hybridism and a lot of combinations. There's also a lot of appropriation. There's a lot of sanitization and reductionism. I mean, these are different ontologies and epistemologies, and dialogs can be very challenging. I think one of the main points of contention is this idea if... Ultimately these plants are beings like you are, like I am. Like humans deep inside that they have their agency and intentionality, they are sentient beings. Then to have the experience, you must be in contact with that.

The shaman, he will always take the substance. It's very rare to have an indigenous shaman that is just giving it away and he's not taking it because he's being guided by that intelligence while he's singing and blowing or sucking or whatever he's doing. He's doing his affairs, his healing affairs.

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This idea that the therapist doesn't have to take the substance is a big difference. The person who is providing the healing doesn't have to be in direct contact. I think this is one of the main points. It's complicated because it's also hard to tell therapists that they should take those plants. There has been a lot of discussion even with the FDA clinical trials. Should the therapist take MDMA or not? Or are they obliged to take? Do they have the right to take? Is it ethical to expect that they would take at least once?

This idea that the healer is also part of the process is also delicate. This emphasis that the healer has to have his personal work, I don't think it's entirely spread as it should. We see a lot of therapists that have a big shadow. We see also a lot of problems and abuse. I have discretely encouraged therapists that seek me out for advice. And I say...

We created a retreat once that we took a lot of therapists to drink ayahuasca in Costa Rica. We were trying to investigate how could ayahuasca help them in their clinical practice? They came up with a lot of different lists of things, and all of them were very decent. For example, let's try to create a ritual in the context of the therapeutic relationship. Or maybe include things like humor, which is very important in native traditions and those kinds of things.

But I think that ultimately, the summary of this retreat and the general understanding was that the therapists need to work on themselves as humans. And if they have their shit... Oops, excuse me... Figured out, together, then they're going to be better humans. They're going to have more self-knowledge, and then they should be better therapists.

We also see this a lot with the courses that we do in Chacruna. We're trying to educate people, therapists, about the roots of psychedelic therapies and teaching them about ceremony, ritual, tradition, indigenous uses, plant medicines, global south.

A therapist might ask, why do I need as a therapist to know if Native Americans are not comfortable with non-indigenous people regulating policies of peyote? How is that going to help me? Why should I take a course that is teaching me about traditional things of indigenous people? How is that useful for my practice?

It's hard to answer, but I think a therapist that is more of a humanist and has a global view of the field and understands better where these practices come from and some of the roots and the origins, I think definitely will have more generous understandings and things to say to his clients.

Also as a movement, I feel it's much more ethical and responsible to recognize the people that came before and not just appropriate practices and chop them up and sanitize and reduce and consume them and think that you're entitled to that. And you're just going to use for your own benefit and that's it. I think both in the healing aspects and on the political foundational aspects, it's really important to have this sort of interchange.

[00:18:38] Alexander Beiner

Yeah, that leads into something I wanted to ask you about, which is such an important question in the psychedelic world, which is around indigenous reciprocity. There's lots of different definitions of even what that means. I thought maybe we could begin with your definition. How do you see indigenous reciprocity?

Dr Beatriz Caiuby Labate

Well, this is obviously very relative and I don't think there's a definition per se. Chacruna has a program called the Indigenous Reciprocity Initiative of the Americas. It's our attempt to do our own contribution. We have created a network of 17 groups through seven countries that we support. The criteria to join our program is that these are groups that are not just one family. They are a collective, and they have some track records proven on the ground of doing work.

They have to have a minimal structure to be able to receive this aid, the support. But if they are big enough and already in the network of big non-profits from the global north, then they are not part of it. The way we support these groups is just supporting their own projects. So the things they already have going on, on the ground.

We're not trying to tell them what to do and how they should choose priorities or report on things or make sexy funding materials to convince us that that is important. We try to support their works where they are at and for general operations. Then we also keep the bureaucracy very small, kind of minimal.

We collect support from small individual donors and the regular enthusiast of ayahuasca or other plants, or we also have reached out to psychedelic businesses and have tried to get larger donations. We have raised so far about 200,000. We have all our reports on the last three years of the activity. They are all published on our site. I invite everybody to visit it.

I think the main spirit of the idea of reciprocity is that some players, some agents, some instances have learned and benefited from others, and there are structural inequalities. The idea of reciprocity is not that I give you something, you give me back. You're giving back because you already took a lot.

So what is this taking a lot? This is the history of colonization, of systemic racism, paradoxes of capitalism. Certain groups that are positioned in marginalized positions have had land stolen, women raped, children abducted, languages forbidden to be spoken, whole economies stolen.

And now it's the last frontier that after consuming and stealing, we are capturing the spirituality. There's a lot of already structural imbalance and differential of resources. We're trying to give back to support those that have done so much already for this field.

We're trying to produce this idea of reciprocity. Of course, the idea of reciprocity is also something that should be just important in the generic fabric of life. This idea that you should reciprocate and things are in connection and in relationship. As I was saying before, everything has an interconnection, and we have to do this exchange as a society, as a person, as a wife or a sister, or employee. It is something that can inspire us in all our relationships always.

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For us, it's part of this program that we created. We are a small grassroots non-profit. We are entirely self-funded. We didn't start with any big institutional support or endowment or big grant. We're not related to any specific foundation or university or patron or mecenas. We just make our own statement in our own terms.

It's not a lot. They are small grants. And they are not as big as we would like it to be, but it has supported in small projects. Paradoxically, because it's not a lot of money, I think it also keeps it honest. There's not millions of dollars to be disputed. But I invite everybody to check our site. We also have currently going on a series that we call Reciprocity Dialogs, which is a series of conversations online that we're doing.

They are on Wednesdays, generally at noon Pacific time. We have had different people, different indigenous people or researchers, different businesses. The legal aspects, the discussion of Nagoya Protocol, discussion of legislation to protect biodiversity and dialogs between scientists and indigenous people on how to move forward psychedelic science.

It's in the making. We invite everybody to join and help us create and define these futures and help influence the course of the so-called psychedelic renaissance.

Alexander Beiner

Yeah, that's the last thing I wanted to ask you about is exactly that. We're in this phase right now of the psychedelic renaissance, as it's been called. It's a complicated term, but we're certainly quite close to psychedelics being medicines in countries in the West within the next... Perhaps year, a couple of years. Already happening in places like Australia. Obviously, very close in the US.

What would you like to see? If you looked at 10 years in the future, let's say, what is the future you'd like to see that integrates different indigenous perspectives? Is equitable? Is there anything right now that you feel is particularly exciting, or if you just had to imagine, what's the ideal for you?

Dr Beatriz Caiuby Labate

I think we have a whole universe to build ahead of us. It's a very young field, and there's a lot of potential, but there's also a lot of challenges ahead of us. We have the challenge of being very commodified and captured by corporate interest. We have the challenge of things being really vulgarized and banalized. We have the challenge of a whole new wave of fake experts trying to benefit and opportunistic people.

We have the challenges of self-appointed practitioners that are not grounded in any communities and don't have any track record of real dedication and real service to this cause. We have the challenges of practitioners that want to take advantage and have sexual abuse and have financial gains.

But we also have a lot of opportunity. We have a lot of opportunity... There's a lot of new career paths that are possible. We have the chance to bring healing to a lot of people. We have the chance to open the mind and bring other concepts from other cultures and other epistemologists

to inspire us, to co-create, and to dream of different futures that are more collaborative, that have greater access, that are more actionable. There's a chance to bring medicines to communities of color in Western countries that are especially marginalized and have suffered from historic legacies of colonization and capitalism and racism and so forth.

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We have the chance to also have profound reflections and conversations. I am, of course, biased, but I am an anthropologist and I'm a researcher. I think we also have a hunger for knowledge and a thirst for culture, for awareness, for different paradigms, for different inspirations. For different ways of seeing the world, different epistemologies that can open us to other ways of thinking, of dreaming, of feeling. Where maybe it's not just, as I said before, the rational vigilante. I don't know if you say that in English. Forgive my English, sometimes I invent words.

Alexander Beiner

It's a cool phrase, though. I like that, "rational vigilante."

Dr Beatriz Caiuby Labate

Well, it's a vigilante. It's like the state of being awake, of not sleeping. There's other ways of knowing that involve the body, the senses, the dreams, esthetics, and intuition and... Is it legitimate to learn through ceremony and other ways that you can't really even express? Because we're not trained. We don't have a vocabulary to express those things because we can maybe have 50 words to describe a car.

We don't have 50 words to describe what we felt in an ayahuasca ceremony because we haven't created those words, because we're just not trained to have those experiences. Our cultures have developed a lot on certain science, technology, and material development and objects. But do we have all those tools to talk about other states of mind and other cultures, other ways of being in the world?

So I think there is a lot of opportunity. I am particularly excited about continuing the field of studies of culture and traditions. That's hard to show the value because it's not instrumental. It's not something you can measure. It's not something you can track and put in your deck and say, "Hey, this is the value. If you do this, then that."

It's not so reductionistic and mechanic, and so it's hard to sometimes get the funding. We also invite everybody that wants to support Chacruna to become a member. We have a series of things to offer.

Alexander Beiner

Beautiful. Really, a very psychedelic vision of the future for me because great opportunity and great challenge. I personally am excited to meet that. Bea, thank you so much. This has been, as always, really fascinating.

[00:30:51] Dr Beatriz Caiuby Labate

Thank you very much. Invite everybody to come to our conference, Psychedelic Culture in the Bay Area. Join our membership and follow us on social media. To be continued, hopefully.

Alexander Beiner

Absolutely. Thanks, Bea.

Dr Beatriz Caiuby Labate

Okay. Bye-bye.