



Conscious Life presents

Indigenous Shamanism in Mexico

Guest: Maria Islas

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[00:00:15] Alexander Beiner

Hi, everybody. I'm here with Maria Islas. In 2015, she founded the Macuil Institute, a community of professional studies in transpersonal psychology that integrates the teachings of master craftsmen, traditional doctors, and native Mexican language teachers in the redefinition of Western notions of health and disease.

She's also trained as a transpersonal psychologist with experience in both psychoanalysis and existential psychotherapy, and she's also a certified somatic movement therapist and educator. Maria, welcome.

Maria Islas

Thank you, Alex.

Alexander Beiner

The first thing I wanted to ask you about is a little bit about your story. How did you get involved in transpersonal psychology and the more shamanic side of your work?

Maria Islas

Yes, of course. Well, first of all, thank you for having me. And it's a pleasure for me to be in this space of dialog and interaction. I really appreciate this. So talking a little bit about myself. I am a Mexican woman that has always been curious about ancient sciences and psychology.

I grew up in Oaxaca, which is a state in the southern part of Mexico. Oaxaca has many, many regions. And all of these regions are really diverse in culture and diverse in, we could say

cosmologies. Cosmovisions. So I grew up in one particular one, which is called The Isthmus of Tehuantepec, which is the narrowest part of Mexico. You know, the Mexican map. So in this part of Mexico, we have always had a lot of beliefs and sciences.

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We always have moved between religious... Like Catholic religion and also ancient belief systems. So since I was a little girl, I grew up with this mixture and blending of cosmovisions, especially those related to health. So what is health? What is disease? What is it to be in harmony? Nothing really mystical, just health. What is health? So every time I got some sickness or I got a flu or I got some problem in my health, I could get, let's say, mainstream medical approach, pills and the symptoms.

But I will also get, let's say, energetical first aid. Okay, let's see, how is your heart? What are your feelings? What are you thinking? Did you get scared or did you see something unusual? Since I was little, I grew up with this understanding, I would say, that health and disease is wider and it involves many, many other aspects than just our physical body.

I can say that these beliefs, at that time, set the basis for me to be really curious about psychology and the mind and how it works, and if really the mind can affect us. You know, the material world. Invisible world and material world. So I studied psychology. I just liked the mind and the dreams and how it works in our lives.

But I also wanted to study anthropology. And I remember one teacher told me, "You don't want to study this. You won't get a job in Mexico. So you will need to work some other place." So I quit anthropology, but I liked it, anthropology, because I also grew up with this sensitivity to the past in Mexico. What are these pyramids? What is this art craft? So I had this sensitivity about mind and culture and colors.

I guess that naturally led me to start to be involved in what we call traditional practices. What is traditional practice? Weaving, handcrafting, dancing, drumming, singing, just learning about art with the artisans. So I started to be involved when I was studying psychology to these groups of people that were in the streets, and they were just like on the edge of society.

Because in Mexico, we have... I dare to say we have these two visions of the indigenous people, like the people in the museum which we really adore and respect. But the real indigenous people that are in the streets are not respected. So I got close to these people because first, I guess my school was in the downtown of Mexico. And every time I went out of school, I just saw these people and I just sat with them and I was very curious about their language.

And then it just came naturally for me to start to wonder about these experiences I had in my childhood. If they were relevant or not, if they were just folklore, if they had a meaning or not. So I just... I mean, long story short, but I just started to consider this past that we read in the books about Mexico. If these indigenous people... The Aztecs, the Mexica, the Zapotecs, if these people were still alive or they were just events of the past.

And fast forward, I got sick when I was 28, and I got this really strange disease. I wasn't having my menstruation and I got really lost because for some women to menstruate, it's really like to be

oriented in time. You know what day is today, so you get this sense of time. I was having troubles with my menstruation, and I was having a lot of pain.

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Of course, I went first with the mainstream model of medicine to take pills and to feel like I probably need to get rid of the symptoms. But this pain that I had was so, so strong that I needed to stop going sometimes to school or just to stop going out. And it was so curious because one day I said, "Okay, I'll just take one break. I will just stop studying what I have been studying. Psychology. I'll just break."

And I was walking in one park in Mexico City, and I came across a group of women, and they were dressed as indigenous women. And I was really curious, of course, and I came close to them, and they were preparing a workshop in backstrap loom, this instrument for weaving.

They said, "Oh, would you like to join us? Because we're missing one participant, so you may want to join us." And I said, "Okay, why not?" So I sat in the park with these two women and the other group of women that we were learning to weave. I may say that's the moment where I really started to get the real insight of what is this ancestral wisdom we talk about. It started with the artisans and women in that park.

Alexander Beiner

Wow, that's beautiful. I love that. Such a vivid image for me. Also not just images, but you talk about weaving. It's almost like you feel your hands. It's very embodied. I'm curious about that because I know you work as a somatic therapist as well. I think very often in the psychedelic world, there's so much focus on the mushrooms or the LSD or whatever it might be. The drug.

It's a very western way of seeing things like, "What's the thing?" And what's often forgotten is the wider cosmivision and the wider embodied practices that go alongside and are a huge part of it. So I'd love to hear your thoughts on a few that are very consistent across different cultures.

So I'm going to do them one by one. So the first one would be the breath. So in your experience, what is the role that the breath plays in those traditions or other traditions that you're involved with?

Maria Islas

Yes. Okay. Perfect. So as you say, the body is so important. I got this, let's say, initiation or curiosity through some body experience. Something in my body was not in harmony, I'd say now. Those days, I'd say I was sick, but I know I was losing harmony. So you know, breath. We have so many images of breath because in the Anáhuac tradition, which I've been studying and I lived in... Anáhuac is the region we call Mesoamérica.

From Alaska to Nicaragua, that's Anáhuac. Alaska, Ashkan Anáhuac. Nicaragua, Nican Anáhuac. Anáhuac is a huge territory where a lot of cultures lived and evolved and created civilizations. In this great civilization, millenary civilization. They were great observers of external nature and

internal nature. And they realized that... And they were really mathematical. That's what I discovered. It's not just like beliefs, it's mathematics.

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They knew that in order to be life, as we know it, we need breath. So the first.... They say we have many medicines in our life. But the first medicine we get when we are born is to be able to breathe. When our mother gives birth to us, the first thing we do is inhale, exhale. And according to these sciences, for the rest of our lives, everything we're going to be doing is to master our breath.

Maria Islas

To learn how to breathe, to inhale, to exhale, to learn how to speak because we're using our breath. So breath is really sacred because actually our breath is borrowed. When we are born, we inhale the breath that is living in the place we're born, in our city, in the hospital, in our home.

So we take this. We borrow this, and we are taking care of this as a precious gift. And when we are going to rest, when we're dying, we give this breath back to life with this last exhalation. So breath is what makes us, humans, in the Earth, and breath is what connects us to everybody, because it's not just my breath. When I'm breathing, I'm exchanging with you and with the trees and with the plants and with everything around me. I am exchanging this invisible force.

So the first medicine we learn is our breath. And these mathematic sciences in the Anáhuac, they say that 52% of our health depends on our breath. Because if we're not breathing, we cannot rest, we cannot get hydration, we're drying. If we are not breathing, if we're not resting, if we are not hydrated, we cannot achieve consciousness, which is the last part.

They have four stages of health. The first one is breath. We call this breath, we call Quetzalcoatl. Some people call it the feather snake. No, no, no. In that name, there's not feathers involved. It's only saying "the beautiful snake, the beautiful vibration." What is the beautiful vibration? Our breath. If we learn to breathe, we really learn how to live because inhaling and exhaling is just two points of a process that we call the process of the water.

The water cycle happens inside of ourselves. When we inhale, metabolize everything, our lungs are like trees. We get hydrated, we get water, and then we exhale steam. The science of Quetzalcoatl is learning how to breathe and how to exchange air and water with our environment. That's why water is so important as well. Actually, when we're breathing, we are getting water inside of ourselves.

Alexander Beiner

Yeah, I love that. That's really nice description. It's so interesting that Western science is catching up to that because it's now all this research coming out about the importance of breathing. I work as a breathwork facilitator as well. I like to point out to people, we breathe 20,000 times a day. There's very few things you do 20,000 times a day.

And if you're doing it, if it's not a full breath, it's not fully connected, it's all up in the chest or all down in the belly, we're losing life force energy. And then also, I found out recently that we burn

most of our calories through the breath. Actually, when we're losing weight, it's actually... It's coming out of the breath, too.

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So it's this whole process. Yeah, it's amazing. So there's another practice which is really fundamental to many cultures, which is dancing. Dancing and movement, let's say. So it'd be great to hear you talk about the importance of that as well.

Maria Islas

Yes, of course. Well, dance, as you say, is so important in every culture. In every mother culture, yes, we used to have dances. So I guess in order to understand dance, we may consider the word called dance, the ancestral word. So this is Mictotilizti. Mictotilizti is a really interesting word because actually it includes breath. Mic in this inhalation.

So Mictotiliztli, it means "I move with my breath." So dancing means the science of moving with your breath. And also through this movement, you make your breath visible. So what is this? According to Anáhuac tradition, dance is a way, let's say... It's a way of praying, if we use this language. Because when we dance, first of all, we dance mainly in groups. We call this circle of dance.

Dance is a way of connecting to a community. We remember that we belong to each other. We're never alone. We say that we are like one finger of a hand. So every human being is part of a bigger being, a bigger self. So when we dance, we realize this because we are moving. And then we are using our body, which is the result of millions of years of evolution.

So dance is really sacred for us because... Well, actually includes drums, the drumming. So dance happens always with rhythm. So rhythm is really like a precious gift we human beings created. Because we have this finger (thumb), this dedo gordo. So this is the memory of evolution. So when we play a drum, we use this finger. Yes.

So for us, dance is a way of praying because we connect to each other. It's a way of remembering because we remember we come from a lineage of a lot of species that could evolve, and they could use two legs, two hands. We could use our voice. It's art. It evokes the arts. Art is evolution. Also, dancing is a way of remembering that human beings, we create vibration.

In every movement we are doing, we are creating reverberance in the space. Of course, now with this ordinary state of consciousness, we're not able to see this. But if I move my hand, I'm creating reverberations in the space. So when we dance according to certain rhythms, we are creating vibration in the space, and we are interfering in the atmosphere. And so dance is so powerful because it also has symbolic elements.

So about dance, just one last thing is that dance is used in Mexican tradition to resemble the role that human beings have in the cycle of life. So when we dance, we use very specific instruments that are called ayoyotes. These ayoyotes, they imitate the sound of the rain. We really dance to evoke rain. Literal rain. You know, it can rain. But also rain as in fertility in human beings.

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So when we're dancing, we are praying or we are saying, "Yes, we human beings are here between the sky and the Earth, just like the rain. And we are in charge of taking care of life. Just like we come from the stars, like the rain from up, and then we will go down inside of the Earth when we die." So we remember this important cycle, this vertical axis, when we dance.

And one last thing, when we dance, we follow mathematics. Four by four, the four directions of the world. We use our 13 joints. Our neck, shoulder, our 13 joints. So we recognize that every 13 years, human beings are transformed. The number 13 is really important for us, and we also use our 10 fingers and 10 toes.

So 13 and 20 are really important numbers for us because it gives 260. And 260 is the number of days it takes for a human being to be created in the womb. So dancing is also the creation of human beings.

Alexander Beiner

That's beautiful. I love that. Yeah. Thank you for sharing that. And then we talked about these fundamentals, breath, movement, dancing, and drumming. And now I'm curious about the traditions you work in. What's the role of psychedelics and plant teachers or fungi teachers within that? Because I wanted to give the broader picture before we talk about that. I think it's really important, but I'm also curious about that.

Maria Islas

Yes, of course. Well, psychedelics, of course, it's a modern world. But let's say before 13th of August of 1521, which is when Mexico, Tenochtitlán, was delivered to Spanish people. So before that day, we can call it ancestrality. We can say ancestrality.

After that day, we say traditional medicine. Yes. Because what happened is that Mexican people decided to blend their sciences with the knowledge that was brought from other lands.

When we say traditional medicine, we are talking from 1521. That's history. Why is this important? Because sometimes we say, "ancestrality, ancestrality." And I want to say we don't know anything about ancestrality. We forgot. We have stones, we have written, we have codex, we have weavers, of course. But they use traditional language in order to be understood.

So this is just an introduction because when we talk about, as we say, plant medicine or psychedelics, we are already using a modern language. But what I want to say is that in the sciences of the Mexican tradition, we have plants for the body. We have plants for the subtle body. We have a really dense body, and we have a really subtle body. We can call it essence, we can call it spirit, or or we can say mind as well.

There are plants for everything. Actually, this is really interesting, but it's not the type of plant. It's not that only this plant works for the mind and only this plant works... No, it is the dose, the dose you use. If you use a specific dose, this plant will work with your mind. If you use another dosage, this plant will work with your body.

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In traditional medicine, like Cosmovision, we are made of five bodies. So 52%, we are made of our physical body. If I use the example of a cell phone, we all know a cell phone. So 52%, all of the material parts of the cell phone. Everything. Cables, screen, charger, everything. That's 52%.

26% electricity. Yes? Because this phone needs electricity to work. It's not charged, it's not working. Also human beings are made of electricity, 26%, let's say, mind. Our mind, electricity. Then 13%, we are made of chemistry. Biochemistry, you know. Hormones, lymph, metabolic processes, but also emotions. Yes.

So we can say that we have the body of the phone, we have the electricity, then we have the software. For us, emotions are like the software that decides how this phone is going to work. It's Android, I don't know what it is. No? So it's like this. Okay, so 13 %, it's emotions or software.

And then 9% is the network. Let's say, the WiFi, what you need it to work, to be connected. So psychedelics, they work... Actually, they don't work with any of these because I say five parts. So this is four parts.

And there is the fifth part. We call newatl. Newatl goes beyond the body, goes beyond the mind, goes beyond emotion, goes beyond the network. So psychedelic medicine or plant medicines is a way of allowing a human being to connect to his newatl, to his fifth element, to his fifth finger. That is the one that is moving the other four. So it has always been present, of course, but it's used only in very specific situations.

Actually, the moments in the years where we consume these medicines are related to the rainy seasons. It's always with the rain, very basic. It's always with the food, with the elements. So plant medicine is related to this newatl, this five part, the fifth element that is our self. And it's a way to help this person, this human being, to connect to a greater cycle that our Mother Earth is going through.

So nowadays, we take psychedelics every weekend or whenever we can. But traditionally, we take it just twice in the year. When we ask for the rain because it's really sacred. So we ask for the rain, we take medicines. Hikuri, peyote. We don't even take mushrooms because we don't have mushrooms. Yes. But we do other ceremonies with plant medicine.

And then we give thanks to the rain. October, November, December, we take medicine again, medicine. So it's not just random. It's not whenever we want. We need to do it when it's the right time to do it, because the big objective of this is to be in harmony. We want to be in harmony, so we need to have a greater orientator, which is our planet Earth.

Alexander Beiner

Wonderful. Yeah. Thank you. Thanks for sharing that. That's fascinating. I didn't know that either. So that's really interesting.

[00:30:14] Maria Islas

Now you know.

Alexander Beiner

Now I know. That's why I love doing this conference. I'm learning constantly. That's great. So the last thing I wanted to ask you about is there's this whole... Obviously, as you know, there is a movement to bring psychedelics into medicine in the US, the UK, etc. And there's a big discussion around how to stay connected and give back, or be true to indigenous cultures who've been using these medicines for a long time.

What are some of the things that you think the Western medical model should really think about in terms of the traditions that you're working with, for example? What are some of the lessons that feel the most important?

Maria Islas

Big question. Wow. Thank you, because this is really important. Just the fact that we ask this question, that we stay like, "Okay, this is happening." It's so important. So thank you for this. It may sound cliché, but the first thing is acknowledging where it comes from. Yes. To realize that this is millenary science and we are not discovering anything.

We're just remembering what we need. So the first thing for me would be just to acknowledge where it comes from. Other parts could be... It's challenging, but it could be to learn some specific words that were used, the language. Some words to call the medicines, because in the words, it's a key. In the word of teonanakatl, or hikuri, or the medicines, there is secret and science. Even in the word... The way we call these medicines is teaching you about the potency of healing, but also the potency of dangers.

Probably mainstream medicine people could get together with elders because they are dying. It's true. Our elders are dying. That age is going to be done really soon. In two, three years, all of our elders are going to be gone. Probably mainstream medicine people will get together with the elders and learn a few key words, a few understandings, a little bit of cosmivision. Not to impose, but just to learn that it's wider, as you said.

And there are many mysteries still in plant medicine that we need to take in consideration. Like this thing I told you about the seasons. Okay, so probably just acknowledging and learning a few words. I think, you know, white people... Medicine of the white people. They need to take care of the other medicines. It's a big responsibility to take care of the other medicines.

One last thing. Traditional medicine works with what we can call a holistic approach. We have one plant, the stem, the leaves, the flowers, the seeds, and every part works together to create healing. So if we just take one part of the plant, it's not healing. It's just entertaining. We need to take the whole plant because one part of the plant is bringing you awareness.

Another part of the plant is bringing you healing. Another part of the plant is bringing... I don't know, your liver. It's helping many parts. So this thing about disassociation or putting in little parts.

I don't know, isolating the substances. That language, I don't know. That's damaging because then we have just a little part.

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And then I've heard that they want to avoid the dizziness of the psilocybin. I mean, that's part of the healing because teonanakatl, it's just the supreme knowledge of our body. Our body is teaching us through the entheogenic experience, but we are very distracted with the images. But the real healing is happening in many dimensions. So, yeah, something I could say.

Alexander Beiner

Wonderful, wonderful. Really, really great. Thank you, Maria. This has been a real pleasure. I appreciate it.

Maria Islas

Oh, my pleasure. Thank you.