

THE HEALING PRACTICES OF A PERUVIAN SHAMAN*

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Summary

The use of psychotropic plants among the mestizo population of the northwestern Amazonas has already been the subject of some research. However, the field is far from fully investigated. Practitioners locally known by the name of "vegetalistas" or simply "maestros" have preserved considerable knowledge of plant lore, and still today contribute substantially to the health care of both rural and urban population.

The present paper is based on field work with one particular such practitioner, Don Emilio Andrade Gómez, a 65-year-old shaman who lives in the vicinity of Iquitos (3°50S 73°15W), northeastern Peru. Some of the basic ideas of his cosmovision are presented. Special attention is given to the concept of "doctor" or "plant teacher", applied to certain plants which are supposed to "teach medicine", if the appropriate conditions of isolation and diet are observed. Some of these plants are added to the hallucinogenic beverage known in the region by the Quéchua name *ayahuasca*, made from the stem of *Banisteriopsis* species, and one or several additives. During the period of isolation the spirits of these plants teach the initiate certain melodies or "icaros" that he will later use when practising his shamanistic activities.

During field work in 1981 and 1982 the author collected various specimens of "plant teachers", part of which have now been identified, and are also presented.

In spite of the fact that nearly 500 years have passed since the beginning of the colonization of the New World by Europeans, shamanism is, even today, a phenomenon which is flourishing among the native and mestizo population of the Americas.

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Hultkrantz (1978) defined shamanism in the following terms: "The central idea of shamanism is to establish means of contact with the supernatural world by the ecstatic experience of a professional and inspired intermediary, the shaman". This ecstatic experience is achieved in many instances of American shamanism through the use of one or several hallucinogenic plants. Over 150 species are reported to have been used, and many of them are still in use today. This implies an extraordinary search for plants with psychotropic properties by the early peoples of the Americas (Schultes and Hofmann, 1980). This is interpreted by La Barre (1970) as a possible survival of an essentially Paleo-Mesolithic Eurasiatic shamanism, carried out of Northeastern Asia by the early big-game hunters. An archaic form of this shamanism persists today in Siberia, and is linked to the use of the hallucinogenic fly-agaric (*Amanita muscaria*) (Wasson, 1968; Furst, 1979, pp. 2,3).

Whatever the explanation of this phenomenon may be, plants now well known like peyote (*Lophophora williamsii*) and San Pedro (*Trichocereus pachanoi*) are still used in sacred ceremonies in Mexico and Peru, respectively and even the ancestral use of magical mushrooms (Heim and Wasson, 1958; Wasson, 1980, etc.) still survives in Mexico and Guatemala. Less known by the general public are several important plants like *Anandenthera peregrina* and the *Virola* snuffs. But there is one hallucinogen known by different names such as *caapi*, *yagé*, *ayahuasca*, *pildé*, *natéma* and prepared in different ways, that hardly any anthropologist or explorer of the tropical rain forest of Brazil, Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador or Peru can fail to at least hear about. This drink is made of one or several plants of the genus *Banisteriopsis*, either alone or in combination with other plants, and is used for a wide variety of purposes including divination, diagnosis of illness, location of game, travelling to places, etc. (Spruce, 1908; Fischer, 1923; Karsten, 1935; Maxwell, 1937; Friedberg, 1965; Reichel-Dolmatoff, 1971, 1972, 1975; Harner, 1972, 1973; Rivier and Lindgren, 1972; McKenna and McKenna, 1975; Deulofeu, 1979; Naranjo, C., 1979; Naranjo, P., 1979).

It was my interest in *yagé* (the Tukanoan term employed in the north-west Amazon) (Furst, 1979, p. 45) that in 1972 led me to visit Don Apolinar Yacanamijoy, a shaman of the Andaquí tribe, then living in the Department of Caquetá, Colombia, my native country. A second visit in 1980 convinced me of the urgency of recording some of his practice on film. Unfortunately he died in May, 1981, before I was able to return there, which obliged me to rearrange my projected plans. Thanks to the suggestions of ethnobotanist Terence McKenna, I travelled to Iquitos, northeastern Peru, in the summer of 1981 with the dual intention of making a documentary film on the use of *ayahuasca* (the Quéchua name used in the region) and to collect medicinal plants.

Iquitos and its vicinity is indeed an area very rich in Indian traditions, and it is relatively easy to find mestizo practitioners who are experts in the

use of *ayahuasca* and other plants, mostly for curing purposes. I learned that research had been carried out in the area by Dobkin de Ríos (1969, 1970a,b, 1971, 1972a,b, 1981a,b), and that Lamb (1971, re-edited 1974) had written a beautiful account of the experience of a now-dead practitioner, Manuel Córdoba Ríos.

In Iquitos, a city of 300,000 people on the left margin of the River Amazon and totally surrounded by jungle, I met several *vegetalistas* (plant specialists), as I did in other places nearby. I decided to concentrate the time available for shooting the film and collection of plant material on only one informant, Don Emilio Andrade Gómez, a 64-year-old mestizo living 12 km from the city.

Don Emilio was born in Iquitos in 1918, of a white father and a *cholita* mother — a term used to indicate strongly Indian physiognomy. He received Christian education at the school he attended for a period of 3 years, and was initiated into the use of *ayahuasca* at the age of 14. He spent several years in the jungle working for companies exploiting rubber and other Amazonian products. During those years he came in contact with Indian shamans, and even learned some Indian languages. I spent 6 weeks with him during July and August, 1981, and 2 weeks during August of 1982. During our long conversations I realized the breadth of his knowledge not only of the flora and fauna of the region, but of Indian beliefs. I could see in his person an interesting case of religious syncretism, where the Christian faith had been superimposed over an Indian mythology, with many elements that have counterparts in certain Amazonian tribes. During those weeks a deep friendship developed. He allowed me to tape many hours of conversation, and did his best to collaborate in the shooting of the film. Under his guidance, voucher specimens of nearly 100 medicinal plants were collected, most of them now identified by Dr. Timothy Plowman and colleagues of the Field Museum of Natural History Chicago, thanks to whom I can now present some botanical information. Although I by no means consider this study complete, nevertheless I would like to present some of the concepts I have learned from Don Emilio.

Like that of the other plant specialists I met in the area, Don Emilio's most common recipe for the preparation of *ayahuasca* consists of boiling together about 30 pieces, 30–40 cm long of the crushed stem of *Banisteriopsis caapi* with 200 leaves of *chacruna* or *yage* (*Psychotria viridis*). Between 12 and 15 l of water are added to the mixture, and it is allowed to boil until it is reduced to about 1 l that is separated into another pot. The operation is repeated seven times, and the extract collected is boiled again until only approx. 500 ml of a syrup-like liquid is left, enough for about 12 doses. The whole process takes 12 h, from six in the morning to six in the evening.

Don Emilio, like other plant specialists, claims to know several kinds of *ayahuasca*. Unfortunately I was not able to collect voucher specimens of these varieties this time. He stressed the necessity of adding the *Psychotria*



Fig. 1. Don Emilio preparing *ayahuasca*.

viridis (apparently he also uses *P. carthaginensis*); otherwise no visions will appear. The *chacrana*, Don Emilio explains, is like the "mirror" of *ayahuasca*. It is known (Schultes and Hofmann, 1980 p. 170) that the effect of the tryptamines present in the *P. viridis* (as in the case of *Diplopterys cabrerana* and others) are enhanced due to the inhibiting effect towards monoamine oxidase (MAO) of the β -carboline harmine and harmaline present in the *ayahuasca* vine (Gorkin, 1966, Pletscher, 1966).

In order to become a shaman, Don Emilio followed all the prescriptions given by his teacher, a mestizo like himself. First of all, during a period of 3 years he lived in isolation in the jungle, observing a very strict diet. This consists mainly of plantains and fish. No sugar, salt or other spices are allowed. No pork, chicken, eggs or alcohol may be consumed. In addition, complete sexual continence should be observed. I realized the importance of the diet when every *vegetalista* I met insisted on this point. In fact, they emphasized it so much that the best way they can claim the depth of their qualification is by expressing the duration of their diets. A minimum of 6 months is generally acknowledged. Don Emilio explained that in older times there were people who could sustain a diet for as long as 10 or 12 years. He humbly admitted that the 3 years he himself kept the diet was not too long, but at least it was enough for him to practice some medicine.

Not every sort of fish is allowed during the diet. I cannot present a complete list at this point. The general criterion seems to be that fish containing too much fat should be avoided. On one occasion he said that no fish "con

muela" (with big teeth) should be eaten. Among those allowed are *sábalo* (*Brycon melanopterus*, *B. erythopterus*), *boquichico* (*Prochilodus nigricans*), *bujurqui* (*Cichlaorus festivum*, *C. severum*), *añashua* (*Crenicichla johanna*), *tucunaré* (*Cichla ocellaris*), *sardina* (*Triportheus angulatus*, *T. elongatus*), *paco* (*Colossoma bidens*), *gamitana* (*Colossoma macropomum*), *corvina* (*Plagioscion auratus*, *P. squamosissimum*) and *paiche* (*Arapaima gigas*). Meat from some jungle animals is allowed, but again there are restrictions with regard to certain species that I have not been able to determine.

There are other restrictions of a ritual character: the initiate can eat only the breast of fowls, and only the left half. His food must be prepared by a young girl 12 or 13 years old, or by a menopausal woman. What is left of his food is packed together and disposed of, so that no man or animal may eat it.

Ayahuasca, like other plants I will mention later, belong to a group that Don Emilio and other shamans call "*doctores*" or plant-teachers. There is a strict difference between taking *ayahuasca* to cure oneself or to see visions, and taking it in order to learn medicine from it. The same can be said of several of the other *doctores*. Whether an initiate will learn medicine is a matter of the person's will (although the plant can "reject" a person), or, as in the case of Don Emilio, he can be "chosen" by the plant. Don Emilio explained that when he was 14 years old he was advised to take *ayahuasca* in order to recover his weakened strength. During the visions he realized that the plant wanted him to learn medicine.

The diet starts the same day the beverage is ingested. How often the plant(s) is taken thereafter seems to be a matter of choice. Apparently it is not necessary to take it more than once or twice a month in order to get the desired effects.

During the diet the initiate enters into contact with a supernatural world populated by both malignant and benevolent spirits. Once the initiate decides to observe the diet in order to learn from the plants, he is challenging spiritual powers. The spirits of the plants will appear in his dreams to teach him "*icaros*", magic songs, with the help of which he can perform different activities, such as curing specific diseases, reinforcing the action of medicinal plants, calling special guardian spirits to assist him, attracting game or fish, causing a rival shaman to fall sleep, or attracting the attention or love of a woman.

He is in constant danger, because the spirits of evil shamans might try to harm him in order to eliminate a possible rival in performing magical tasks. They will send him "*virotos*", magic darts that will, if not protected, enter his body and might even kill him. It is interesting to observe that the function of the "*maestro*" or older shaman is not that of teaching medicine, which is done by the plant itself, but that of protecting the novice and instructing him in the proper way of preparing and ingesting the magic plants, in order to deal with supernatural powers.

Learning medicine demands full concentration during a long period of

time. The initiate must not worry about practical matters. His food is provided by an assistant, expert in fishing and hunting, and perfectly aware of all the prescriptions. The initiate will be in a situation in which he can devote himself to the full observation of the flora and fauna that surround him. Anything happening during that period of time is full of crucial meaning. He will acquire several helping spirits that will appear to him when the proper melody is sung or whistled, and who will assist him in situations of danger.

When I questioned him about the nature of his helping spirits, Don Emilio told me about three of them, which he can evoke through the proper *icaro* in case of necessity. A little bird that whistles a specific melody will fly around his head to warn him of any danger; a huge black bull will make the spirit of evil shamans take flight; a winged black Brazilian, to whom he always communicates in Portuguese (!), with six daggers around his belt and one in each hand, will follow the evil spirits to the Andes, where he will force them to enter dark tunnels; then he will block the entrance with a huge black stone.

As is evident from this description, the spirits have often either zoomorphic or anthropomorphic features. Many plants and animals have for Don Emilio a dual appearance, one ordinary and one supernatural. Some of the plant-teachers appear to him as children, maidens or men, sometimes small, sometimes large. Some of these spirits have quite an ordinary appearance. Others present themselves with extraordinary characteristics — without a head, with rich or exotic garments, etc.

When learning from *ayahuasca* or any of the plant-teachers, there exists for the initiate the temptation of accepting powers from evil spirits, who offer him power and/or money, and who will teach him how to harm other people. Superimposed on a host of mythological creatures, such as the *Sacha-runá*, a creature documented from different Indian tribes (Naranjo, P., 1979 p. 141), the basic cosmology of Don Emilio is a dualistic one, divided into good and evil, and ruled over by Christ and Satan. An initiate can then choose which way to go. On occasion, however, as happens often among Indian shamans, the same person can learn to cure and to harm people. Don Emilio says that he knows nothing about witchcraft, because he has always been on the side of the Lord.

As the etiology of illness is of great importance when dealing with healing techniques, it is necessary to have a certain idea of how he conceives this matter. He distinguishes, like many people in the region, between illnesses caused by pure accident, distraction or indolence, and those caused by evil powers. These evil powers belong to a complex satanic world that it is not yet clear in my mind. Certain spirits of the jungle may cause an illness to someone alien to it. Young children taken to a new place may be the object of an attack by the spirits living there. But there are also illnesses caused by the direct action of a *brujo*, a witch, or by a third person with their help.

The most common way that a witch causes harm to a person is by throw-

ing him a *virote*. Don Emilio has described the *virote* to me in physical terms. It is a sort of transparent phlegm in which a little piece of wood, a bone or a seed might be immersed, and that is able to penetrate into the body of a victim. Harner (1973) has studied thoroughly the corresponding concept among the Jívaro Indians of Ecuador. The belief in the physical existence of these *virote*s is very strong. For instance, one of Don Emilio's clients, a young man from Iquitos, assured me that a shaman among the Shipibo Indians of the Ucayali river, whom he identified by name and address, boasts of his powers when he is drunk, and is able to regurgitate a heavy phlegm in which *virote*s of many kinds, even pieces of razors, are suspended. I assisted in — and even filmed — several healing sessions where Don Emilio extracted a *virote* from the body of a patient. Although an immediate relief always was felt by his patients, several sessions were necessary to fully remove all the phlegm supposedly to have penetrated their bodies.

Having challenged the evil powers, the initiate must learn how to protect himself, especially since a very important part of his future mission when back in his community is the practice of medicine. Therefore the extraction of *virote*s sent by witches that might try to harm him is important. Protection of the body is a very important concept for Don Emilio. *Ayahuasca* and the plant-teachers in general always provide the initiate with wisdom ("sabiduría") and at the same time with strength ("fuerza") to deal with the supernatural world.

But let us now talk about who or which these plant-teachers are to which Don Emilio is referring. The first one, called by Don Emilio "*the king of all plants*", is *tobacco*. The importance of tobacco among the native population of the Americas, from Canada to Patagonia, is well documented (see Wilbert, 1972; Furst, 1979 pp. 23–32). It seems that in this region, as I have observed among the different people I have met in Iquitos and its vicinity, *tobacco* is still very important. It is this plant that the initiate must be perfectly acquainted with, if he wants to learn medicine. Tobacco is a medicine in itself, used in several ways and for different purposes, taken orally or through the nostrils, applied externally, smoked or as an enema. Many, perhaps most healers of this area (it is difficult to know exactly when the term "shaman" should be employed), stay at this level of learning, and do not use any other of the plant-teachers. They know how to use tobacco properly, and are able to cure certain illnesses, apparently most of them ethnospecific. One of these is "*susto*", manifested especially in children, and caused by any frightening episode, or when confronting the spirit of a dead person; probably there are many others that I have not yet been able to determine at this point of my research.

Blowing tobacco smoke when using any medicinal plant will purify the environment and will build a shield against evil powers. Tobacco is involved in the process of creating an "*arcana*", a sort of invisible armor that will protect the initiate or the patient against the *virote*s. Plant-teachers, like

ayahuasca are "fond of" tobacco, and a few cigarettes of *mapacho*, a local variety, are often added when preparing the beverage. It should be noted that North American-type of cigarettes are not used in any shamanistic or medicinal context.

But tobacco is limited to the curing of only certain illnesses. *Ayahuasca* and the other plant-teachers are taken to learn more. The path of knowledge is infinite. *Ayahuasca* will open to the initiate unthinkable horizons of beauty and terror. The spirit of the plant, that might take a different form for each initiate — an ant, a sparrow hawk or a little old man, as in the case of Don Emilio — will instruct him through magic songs or melodies, the *icaros*, which will be in the future the most powerful weapons of the shaman. If an *ayahuasquero* or expert in the use of *ayahuasca* of this region, is questioned about the extent of his knowledge, he will almost invariably answer: "I have dieted so long and I know so so many *icaros*". Don Emilio knows about 60–70 of them, most of which I have recorded. I have met *ayahuasqueros* who claim to know more than 200. If this is so, some of these people could be authentic repositories of Indian melodies, most of them having a clear compositional and melodic similarity to native music. Other plant-teachers will teach the initiate other magic songs, with a wide variety of functions.

Don Emilio explains that because *ayahuasca* is a vine, it needs strong trees to cling to. In other words, *ayahuasca* is not enough for somebody who wants to deal with strong powers. If he was only an "*ayahuasquerito*" (a poor little *ayahuasquero*), he would be at the mercy of anyone knowing more than him. And, of course, there are always *vegetalistas* (plant-specialists) who know more than him. These are the *paleros* (from "*palo*", a Spanish word meaning in this area something like "big tree"), who have taken very strong drugs from trees and dieted. Quite often the concept of *palero* is associated with that of a witch. That is because the temptation to use evil powers is stronger the more is learned. That is why there exists a hierarchy among shamans, depending on the knowledge they have, or in other words, depending on the number and type of plants they master. Don Emilio would never agree to suck out a *virote* sent by somebody stronger than himself. Then he would be in danger, and at the same time would be unable to protect his patient from future attacks.

So far I have only been able to identify a few of the plant-teachers. Some of them are added to the *ayahuasca* drink mixture (*Banisteriopsis caapi* or any of the active *Banisteriopsis* plus the *Psychotria*). Others are taken by themselves. Two of them, *toé* (*Brugmansia suaveolens*) and *uchu-sanango* (*Tabernaemontana* sp.), I have found among the additives in the literature of *ayahuasca* (e.g. Ayala and Lewis, 1978). *Toé*, according to Don Emilio, is used when the shaman wants to determine who is the witch who has sent the *virote* to his patient. Only two leaves are added to the *ayahuasca* decoction. He considers this plant a very strong one. Like other species of the same genus (Schultes and Hofman, 1980 p. 264 ss), it is indeed a very powerful

hallucinogen. The roots of *uchu-sanango*, on the other hand, can be used as a medicine for certain diseases, and also to learn medicine from it. About ten drops of the juice from the roots (water added) are taken, either alone or with *ayahuasca*. Don Emilio considers this plant to be a very strong one too. It gives visions. In order to learn from it 4 or 5 months of diet must be observed. Thirty days of diet are compulsory if it is used as a medicine; otherwise it can poison the person.

The bark of *ayahuman* (*Couroupita guianensis* Aubl.), *caupuri* (*Virola surinamensis* (Rol.) Warb.), *tangarana* (*Triplaris surinamensis* Chamisso.), *chuchuhuasi* (*Maytenus ebenifolia* Reiss.), and *hiporuru* (*Alchornea castaneifolia* (Willd.) Juss.) are added as well to the *ayahuasca* beverage. Not identified through voucher specimens collected by me, but well known in the region and mentioned in Villarejo (1979p. 101 ss), the bark of the following trees can be added to *ayahuasca*, one at a time: *capirona* (*Calycophyllum spruceanum* Kook), *cumaseba* (*Caesalpinia echinata*), *tamshi* (*Carludovica divergens* Drude), *lopuna* (*Chrorisia insignis* HBK), *huacapurana* (*Campsiandra laurifolia* Benth) and *tahuari* (*Tabebuia incana* A. Gentry).

The leaves of *sueda con sueda* (*Phtirusa pyrifolia* HBK Eichler), when the diet is observed, are able to teach medicine as well. It produces visions, but very "light" ones, according to Don Emilio. The latex of *catahua* (*Hura crepitans* L.) and *ojé* (*Ficus* sp.) are taken by themselves, and are considered by Don Emilio to be very powerful plant-teachers. The juice of the shoots of *raya balsa* (*Montrichardia arborecens* Schott.), of the Aracea family, is supposed to give the power of travelling through water to visit the people that live in the bottom of lakes and rivers. I have a few other local names of plant-teachers, but the botanical identification has not yet been made.

Don Emilio insists that some of these plants are very "jealous": if the diet is not observed perfectly, they can cause harm to the initiate and even kill him. The length of the diet is prescribed by the spirit of the plant. The idea of the plant killing the violator of the diet has its counterpart in the belief of the Jívaro Indians of Ecuador. According to Naranjo, P. (1979) p. 135), the learning shaman must observe a strict diet to prevent his *tunchi* (similar to the *virote*) fleeing or changing into a poison which will kill him. But it is Yagua shamanism, as described by Chaumeil and Chaumeil (1979), that to my knowledge presents the closest parallelism to Emilio's cosmology. It is not my intention at this point to elaborate on such a comparison. Nevertheless I want to point out that as can be seen from the local names of the plant "auxiliaries" mentioned to be used by Yagua shamans, several of them seem to be identical with the plant-teachers of Don Emilio; but that cannot be determined as the scientific names are not mentioned.

So far as I have been able to establish, what motivates Don Emilio and the other *vegetalistas* I have met in their search for plant-teachers is their exploratory curiosity. These plants will provide means of access to "realities" beyond the ordinary scope of life. The medicinal aspect seems to be only a consequence of being able to manipulate some of the hidden forces that constantly influence their lives.

Don Emilio is not only a doctor that takes care of the bodies of his patients. He is often visited by people of all social classes for all sorts of personal problems, specially those dealing with the heart. Very much of his practices is besides devoted to giving baths of *sacha-ajos* (*Mansoa alliacea* (Lam) A. Gentry.), for the curing of *saladera* or bad luck, a culture-bound misfortune syndrome quite common among the urban population of Peruvian Amazon (Dobkin de Ríos, 1981b). This plant is also used for the treatment of rheumatism in this area, and has a wide distribution, from Mexico to Peru and the French Guiana (Morton, 1981). It "teaches medicine" if the proper diet is observed, and seems to constitute one of the most important plants in Don Emilio's practice.

There are several other aspects of Don Emilio's cosmology that it is my intention to treat in a future paper. My film "*Don Emilio and his little doctors*" (29 m, 16 mm colour) illustrates certain ideas better than with words; and, most of all, shows the tremendous humanity of people like Don Emilio, whose knowledge seems to be destined to disappear forever because of the growing impact of the Western way of life.

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