



Working with “La Medicina”: Elements of Healing in Contemporary Ayahuasca Rituals

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ABSTRACT

Healing is an essential aspect of Amazonian mestizo shamanism. Not only is it one of the most commonly quoted motives for Westerners for participating in ayahuasca ceremonies, but most elements of an ayahuasca ceremony are aimed to heal and protect. This article is purely ethnographic, and its purpose is to provide insight into the ways healing is conceived by both ayahuasqueros and Western participants in the context of shamanic tourism in Iquitos, Peru. I show that illness is perceived to have physical, psychological, and spiritual dimensions, and healing is a complex process that takes place in and outside of ceremony. I show that a multitude of elements in a ceremony converge to address all three dimensions of illness, one of the most important ones being the element of personal crisis. Often present in healing narratives, the element of crisis becomes the catalyst for positive transformation, including physical, psychological, and spiritual healing. Rather than being seen as a singular event, healing in this context is seen as a process, in which the patient carries the responsibility for their own healing.

KEYWORDS: healing, ritual, shamanism, ayahuasca, Amazonia



INTRODUCTION

Ayahuasca is above all, a medicine—the great medicine

– Schultes and Hofmann (1992:122)

Ayahuasca no es droga. Ayahuasca es medicina.

– Norma Panduro

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The above sentiment was expressed by the majority of my consultants, as ayahuasca was rarely referred to by its name; rather, it was referred to as “medicine” or “medicina,” especially by experienced users. The following is based on data collected during 17 months of dissertation fieldwork between 2003 and 2005 and a short trip in the summer of 2007, in and around the jungle town of Iquitos, Peru. The central goal of my research was to examine the ways in which ayahuasca is constructed and perceived by Westerners in the context of shamanic tourism. I chose Iquitos as a research site because, as a gateway to the eco- and shamanic tourism in the area, it serves as a location where different cultural constructions of ayahuasca coexist, namely the urban mestizo use and the Western one, creating a unique cultural milieu. I participated in over 60 ayahuasca ceremonies in various contexts, including some retreats that specialize in ayahuasca tourism. I did not work with one ayahuasquero throughout my fieldwork, nor did I become an apprentice, because I wanted to get a better feel of the different contexts in which ayahuasca was administered and wanted to include multiple perspectives in my dissertation. I worked with nine ayahuasqueros, interviewed 82 participants (mostly Westerners), and had informal conversations with several dozen more. In this article, I will present the ways that healing was perceived in this context both by ayahuasqueros and by Western participants, creating a unique and dynamic model. Although the topic has been discussed in recent publications (Beyer 2009), there are few in-depth ethnographic studies of shamanic tourism available.

Many cultures attribute illness to a psycho-physiological disequilibrium in the human organism, which may include a social element. This is no different in *curanderismo*,¹ where the root of disease is located in the spiritual as well as social sphere. To treat illness, the *curandero* employs a variety of methods, such as prayers, icaros, massages, sucking, blowing, smoke, incense, oils, perfumes, and plant essences. Often, Peruvian externalizing explanatory models place the cause of a patient’s problem outside of themselves and treatment requires manipulation of forces external to the patient—at least in Western eyes they are perceived as external even though it could be argued that it is not necessarily so for the ayahuasqueros. Sorcery or spirits can be responsible for disease, and ayahuasqueros manipulate these forces and treat external cosmological as well as social problems. As Lenaerts argues when discussing Ashéninka explanatory models, illness is perceived to be due to a problem “within the complex network of intertwined wills that interconnects all living beings” (2006:62).

During my research, I observed that locals did not visit ayahuasqueros for illness that is easily explained as a result of natural causes, such as flu, infection, and so forth. In fact, many people are knowledgeable enough to self-medicate using plants. One also has the option of visiting the plant market or the Western pharmacy to obtain remedies for such ailments. Locals would attend ayahuasca ceremonies for healing when they suffered from

general malaise that could not be explained as anything other than a sorcery induced illness; in other words, the result of shamanic intervention by a malevolent shaman or the result of *envidia* (envy).

On the other hand, Westerners tended to seek the source, as well as the solution, to their problems inside of themselves. In this healing paradigm, the responsibility for healing is placed on the individual. However, they did recognize that some of their troubles might have originated because of societal influences and former life experiences, for instance childhood trauma. It was perceived that the cause of the disequilibrium in the body was not the external factors per se but rather the way the individual responded to them. With ayahuasca they sought to detoxify themselves from the negative feelings that they were still holding onto from societal influences or childhood trauma and create the conditions for successful healing.

What seemed to draw Westerners to shamanism as a more desirable healing tool was that it addresses the spiritual dimension of healing, along with the physical. It is perceived that many diseases in the West come from a spiritual disconnect from nature, other human beings, and archaic modes of thought that ayahuasca could help remedy. One Westerner, who had just arrived to Iquitos seeking healing with a local ayahuasquero, said that she “had been led there” after an encounter with a healer on the coast of Peru who had told her that she had a “fragmented psyche.” Often, the spiritual component of healing had larger ramifications for Westerners as it was perceived that individual healing would in turn contribute to the collective healing of humanity.

This interest in the spiritual concerns of the patient is not unlike other alternative healing modalities familiar to Westerners. Alternative healing methods, such as Reiki, were often employed during ayahuasca ceremonies. Although an increasing number of psychologists and medical doctors in the West are starting to recognize the importance of the inclusion of spiritual concerns for patients’ healing and well-being, all my consultants found that biomedicine is lacking in this respect. In fact, their engagement with shamanism was often an implicit critique of biomedicine.

What makes ayahuasca such an encompassing healing tool is the holistic approach of ayahuasca shamanism, its attempt to treat the whole person. One of the ayahuasqueros I worked with used to say that ayahuasca is “the best psychologist in the world”; indeed many Westerners that seek ayahuasca today do so for psychological healing, and some have benefitted from it. The same ayahuasquero also emphasized, before most ceremonies, that ayahuasca has three parts, meaning it works on three levels: the physical, the psychological, and the spiritual. Using this model, shamans can claim that they can heal anything, from cancer to a fragmented soul. It is important to note that,

according to this model, the physical, psychological, and spiritual are intertwined rather than being seen as separate realms.

The elements described in the next section are meant to address all three dimensions of healing and contribute to healing and protection. Most ceremonies I attended involving Western participants focused on psychological and spiritual healing and growth. Sometimes there were participants who required special attention because they were trying to heal something specific, whereas other times there was an underlying intent to heal.



ELEMENTS OF HEALING IN AYAHUASCA CEREMONIES

Ayahuasca is the first element I will discuss and the one that everything else revolves around in ceremonies. Ayahuasca is not only the means to achieve another state of consciousness; rather, it is considered itself a healing plant, “the mother of all plants.” Curanderos in the area claim to be able to heal all forms of illness with ayahuasca, from cancer to AIDS. Reality is not as straightforward, as there is no consistent evidence that supports this, apart from anecdotal reports. Although there is indication that ayahuasca contains alkaloids that help with anxiety and depression² (Santos et al. 2007), it is important that more research is done in this respect to determine the existence of alkaloids beneficial for other conditions.

Dosage of the brew varies among shamans. Most would say that they administered the dosage indicated by the spirits. Only one ayahuasquera said that she had a standard dose of 50 milliliters that she gave to all participants unless they experienced no effect with this dose. Additionally, she would offer a second dose later in the ceremony to anyone who requested it. Another ayahuasquera had three different bottles of ayahuasca in front of her, and she mixed brew from all three of them in every glass she served. Later, she told me that the ayahuasca brew in the three bottles was from different batches. She said that she liked doing it this way, instead of mixing the batches ahead of time, as other ayahuasqueros do. Having tried the ayahuasca brew from each batch before she gave it to people, she had a sense of which one to give to each participant. She also administered different quantities and had two different size glasses for this purpose.

Most of the ayahuasqueros I worked with did not make extensive use of plants besides ayahuasca to heal patients. It was believed that invoking the spirits of the plants and their energy in ceremony is enough to heal, hence the physical plant is not necessary. This is not unique; Lenaerts (2006) when discussing the Ashéninka argues that an ayahuasquero is not necessarily a good botanist. Their job is to manage a network of personal relationships involving all living beings. He also found that most “lay” people had detailed

knowledge of herbs. This is consistent with my findings. One ayahuasquera used a set number of plants during the time I was there for a variety of issues or ailments—including treating drug addiction—one of them being *piri piri* (*Cyperus articulatus*). Many ayahuasqueros used a variety of aromatic plants and flowers in *baños de flores* (flower baths) that were usually administered in the daytime before ceremonies. The client would be given a plastic tub with water in which a mixture of flowers, herbs, and some cologne were diluted. The patient was supposed to pour this over their body to cleanse and protect themselves from sorcery.

Mapacho (*Nicotiana rustica*) is used throughout the region during the preparation of the ayahuasca brew as well as during the ceremony. It is considered a very powerful spirit, and as one of my consultants told me, pointing to the bundle of mapacho cigarettes that he had lined up for ceremony, one cannot be a shaman if they are not willing to smoke several mapacho cigarettes during the ceremony. During the ayahuasca preparation, mapacho smoke is blown on the pot where the ayahuasca is cooking to bless the brew. Mapacho is also blown on the plants that are going to be used before they are harvested and before they are placed in the pot. At the beginning of the ceremony, ayahuasqueros blow smoke in the four directions for protection and to establish the ceremonial space. During the ceremony, mapacho is blown on the bottle of ayahuasca, each individual cup serving of the brew, as well as on ceremonial objects and participants.

Several things are used in ceremony for extra protection and cleansing. One of them is *Agua Florida*, or *Agua de Florida*³ (literally flowered water), which is used by almost all the ayahuasqueros I worked with in the area. It is first used on the body of the ayahuasquero, usually the neck, face, and arms, for protection at the beginning of the ceremony, and then it is passed to all participants and applied to their body with the same intent. Plastic bottles with items preserved in *aguardiente*⁴ for their protective and healing powers are used similarly in ceremony. One of the most common ones is *alcanfor* (camphor), and I have seen some ayahuasqueros use certain types of onions and garlic, preserved in *aguardiente*, in the same way. Typically, they hold a small amount of the *aguardiente* in their mouth and blow it on their body for protection before the ceremony. Some will pass it around to the participants who wish to do the same. *Alcanfor* will also be applied on the body around the neck and arms for protection. In addition, smelling the camphor from the bottle right after drinking the brew will cleanse one's palate and suppress the urge to vomit.

In some rare cases, *Palo Santo* was used during a ceremony as incense. *Palo Santo*, or holy wood, is the wood of the *Bursera graveolens* or *Bursera microphylla* tree (Rätsch 2005). It can be bought at the market in small pieces and can be burned to smoke or smudge the room at the beginning of

a ceremony. The pleasant smell it emits makes it desirable by some people, but it was not often used in the ceremonies I attended. It was regularly used by one ayahuasquero who also used essential oils, while other times I have seen it used by some of the participants.

The *schacapa* is another very important healing tool for shamans. It is a rattle that consists of a bundle of leaves from the *Pariana* spp. palm. It might appear that its sole purpose is to provide a monotonous sound during the ceremony, but it is much more than that. It is used to direct energy to where it is needed or to remove negative energy from the patient's body. Only one ayahuasquero and his apprentice did not use a schacapa of this type in their ceremonies. Instead they used a bundle of leaves from the *ruda*⁵ plant. They used it the same way as the common schacapa, but it is not as loud and has a discreet and pleasant smell. They preferred to use ruda because it has the ability to absorb any negative energies from the patient. Both schacapas are used in ceremony in similar ways. While the ayahuasquero sings, they shake the schacapa producing a monotonous sound that accompanies the icaros, while when they perform an individual healing, they tap the patient's body with it. The sensation of tapping the schacapa on the crown of the head can be very soothing. When the ceremony is lead by multiple ayahuasqueros and several schacapas are used at the same time, the effect can be quite impressive.

Most of the ayahuasqueros I worked with did not use musical instruments in their ceremonies, although some have started to include them, taking advantage of the healing effects of sound. One of the European ayahuasqueros I worked with used to play the flute toward the end of the ceremony as well as used a bell. In another ceremony lead by an apprentice of a different ayahuasquero, who did not observe the exact protocol of his teacher's ceremony, participants were allowed to play instruments toward the end of the ceremony, while in another, someone brought a didgeridoo that he played after the ceremony was closed. One of the ayahuasqueros also used a rain stick, which made a very impressive sound during ayahuasca ceremonies. Only one ayahuasquero did not use a schacapa at all. She used other instruments, panpipes, rattles, and a drum, but only toward the end of the ceremony.

One ayahuasquero also used magical stones, known as *encantos* or *peder-nales*, in his ceremonies. Along with his other ceremonial objects, he had a stone that was given to him a long time ago that was supposed to absorb disease and negative energies. His apprentice also had a stone, a smaller one, which she used to treat patients. These stones are believed to be special in that they contain *genios* (spirits) much like plants and animals. This ayahuasquero told me that he uses his stone to take away pain or disease from a specific spot. He placed it on a part that hurt, and according to the way the

stone sweat, he knew what to do. He and his apprentice claimed to have healed people of serious chronic conditions.

Mesas, or ceremonial altars, are not as common in Amazonia as they are in Andean traditions. All the above ceremonial objects are usually kept somewhere during the days that they are not used and are placed in front of the ayahuasquero without much ceremony. However, a few ayahuasqueros are starting to create mesas, some temporary and some more permanent. In one retreat, I was told that they received the message from the spirits to create a mesa with a variety of objects, which are meant to provide protection, defense, and power, or are symbolic of something that will. In this case, the mesa was permanent and it was in the ceremonial house. Another ayahuasquero, who held ceremonies at his house and did not have the space for a permanent mesa, put one together just before the ceremony in front of his seat. In both cases, everything was placed on a decorated cloth, which represented the ceremonial space (Figure 1).

In the ayahuasca retreat with a permanent mesa, on the periphery of the cloth were a number of big white crystals that represented “dimensional gateways.” I was told that their cracks can take one to other dimensions and they represent the “crystal palace in which the shamans work.” Other objects on the mesa included a number of crystals, semiprecious stones, and a big piece of amber that represent different elements and their powers; two bells



FIGURE 1. TEMPORARY MESA USED DURING AN AYAHUASCA CEREMONY HELD AT THE AYAHUASQUERO'S HOUSE (PHOTO BY AUTHOR, APRIL 2005).

that are used to clear a patient's energy; two eagle feathers and a condor feather that embody the qualities of these birds; some figurines that symbolize *pachamama* (Mother Earth in Quechua) and other spirits that were considered powerful; some shells that represent the ocean, including a big shell from the Andes that they blow at the beginning of the ceremony to call the spirits; a mortar and pestle with some saw dust and herbs that represent the medicine that they practice; a row of crystal balls that are used for divination and represent the planets; and a stone artifact, which was used by indigenous people, with a hole in the middle fitted at the end of a stick as a weapon and represented protection. Finally, there were a couple of meteorites that represented space. All these different elements were meant to represent different parts of the cosmos.

Another element of healing in this shamanic tradition is the *soplos* or *sopladas*, which involve blowing healing energy on a patient. This is an integral part of ceremonies but is also used as a healing tool on its own. For example, an ayahuasquero might determine that they have to perform *sopladas* every day on a patient for a period of time until they show improvement. What is physically blown on the patient is *mapacho* smoke, but I was told that at the same time shamans blow “medicine” that resides in their body. Curanderos acquire spiritual force or medicine as it was called by others, which normally resides in their body, during their training and diets. During ceremonies, they can blow (*soplar*) this medicine into the patient and change their condition or heal them. During the ceremony, curanderos will blow smoke on the crown of the head, the back, and the hands of the participant after they drink the ayahuasca. In some cases, they will repeat it during the ceremony when they perform a personal healing on the person.

Sucking, or *chupada*, is another element that is important in removing negative energies or disease from the body, but it was not used as widely as *soplada* in the context of tourism. Although it is a very important part of indigenous Amazonian shamanism, I have only seen it used on three occasions by two ayahuasqueros with whom I worked around Iquitos. The first time the ayahuasquero was trying to remove sorcery from a local woman, the second time the ayahuasquero was healing a local woman of suspected sorcery, and the third time the ayahuasquero treated me and a local friend and sucked from my belly button for a few minutes. What is sucked out of the body is the physical manifestation of disease or, in cases of sorcery, the ill will of a sorcerer, which can take the form of a variety of objects such as twigs, worms, feathers, or stones.

Purification and *cleansing* are instrumental in ayahuasca healing. First, there are certain dietary restrictions that are meant to keep the body pure before the ceremony. The diet requires refraining from spices, sugar, salt, oils, meat (especially pork, which is to be avoided for 30 days after the last

ceremony), stimulants, and sex. Pork is to be avoided because of its “dirty energy,” especially its fat. Diet is very important in other shamanic traditions as well. Siikala (1992:213) mentions that Siberian shamans fast, meditate, and go into seclusion before ceremonies. Amazonian shamans also fast during their apprenticeship and practice sexual abstinence. Following a specific diet is very important, as in many Amazonian societies illness is considered to be the result of breaking food taboos, of which there are many (Hugh-Jones 1979).

The diet includes abstinence from sex for a few days before the ritual and eight days afterwards. The idea behind this is that the plants remain in one’s system for days after the ceremony and will continue to work and heal or teach the person, provided that they stay pure. Although I could not get a consensus from my consultants on the reasons behind some of the rules, most shamans agreed on the prohibitions themselves. The only disagreement was on the topic of fruit. While most shamans would allow fruit to be consumed, one particular ayahuasquero would not allow them because they contain sugar. On the day of the ceremony, one is not supposed to eat anything after noon, and it is suggested to eat a light meal or just fruit and drink herbal teas. On the day following the ceremony, one is not supposed to eat or use soap or toothpaste before noon. Some ayahuasqueros have a particular way to “break” the diet on the following day, which usually involves salt and lemon taken directly under the tongue.

One prohibition that is not very popular is the sexual abstinence rule. Ayahuasqueros would have different theories as to why sex is prohibited, as well as different observation approaches. A Western ayahuasquero said that he had been taught the spirit of ayahuasca is very jealous and does not want people to have sex when it resides in their body. In his opinion, and from a Western point of view, the rationale behind the prohibition is because sex is a “very strong, very open, energetic exchange.” The energies of the persons interfere with each other, and it can “defocus” someone who is dieting and doing spiritual work. He added that he did not exclude the possibility that this taboo was a Catholic influence.

As mentioned, participants are encouraged to keep the diet for some time after the ceremony, as the medicine continues to be in the body; in order for it to continue working, the body needs to remain pure. If the diet is broken, the healing or spiritual work stops and sometimes worse things can happen. Peruvian consultants have told me that they got skin rashes from breaking the diet. Ayahuasqueros and patients are known to be “punished” by the spirits for not following the dietary restrictions. In one ceremony, a young man that had eaten a full meal in the afternoon of the day of the ritual insisted on drinking ayahuasca with the rest of the group despite the warning

of the ayahuasquero. After much persistence he was allowed to drink, but during the ceremony he had a truly hard time—vomiting and generally feeling sick—as well as having unpleasant and scary visions. The ayahuasquero pointed out to him several times during the ceremony that ayahuasca was punishing him for not having fasted.

On occasion, I have witnessed other plants used to purify the body before an ayahuasca ceremony. This is usually done in the morning of the day of the ceremony. These plants will induce vomiting or diarrhea or both. On one occasion, the latex of the *oje* plant (*Ficus insipida*) was used to induce powerful purging. Oje is quite toxic and a large quantity of water needs to be drunk with it to avoid poisoning. On another occasion, an ayahuasquera gave *piñones blancos* (probably the nut of the *Jatropha curcas*) to a large group of tourists at an ayahuasca retreat. Most people retired in their individual rooms, but throughout the day one could hear the purging sounds all over the camp. One of the guests said jokingly that the ayahuasquero was a naughty witch and had created a “vomit camp.” The ayahuasquera told me that she did this so people would have less to purge during ceremony and would “suffer less.”

Purging is a rather central aspect of ayahuasca ceremonies. When I asked one of my consultants if he usually vomits during ceremonies, he said he keeps the medicine down as long as it is still medicine; then he vomits when it “stops being medicine.” Another participant said that one time when she tried to vomit, it was “like giving birth to a very strange and ugly creature from the mouth.” Another shared that when she vomited she saw spirits that were encouraging her and sometimes seemed to be waiting to collect what she vomited. She felt that the reason they were there was to collect it. Vomiting is not the only way to purge; one of the ayahuasqueros I worked with said that yawning is also cleansing and that crying is the best form of cleansing because it is cleansing at the emotional level as well. Sweating is also cleansing as are other bodily sensations. For example, during a series of ceremonies I felt feverish, but when I told the ayahuasquero about this, he said that this is a wonderful way of cleansing and he sometimes felt like that himself. One of the participants I interviewed described his purging experience like this:

During the vomiting, I felt like my skin had turned red and bat wings had appeared in my back. When I vomited, I felt like I was cleansing myself and throwing out all the shit I had inside: physical, emotional, psychological. I kind of saw that when I vomited, during the act of vomiting, my skin turned from red to pink and then white, I wanted white, so I wanted to vomit, I didn't want to be a “demon,” I wanted to be an “angel” . . . I could feel the shit been sucked from my toe, coming

up and accumulating and then thrown out to the bucket. I wanted to be white, not red. [Research Data, April 2005]

A very important element in an ayahuasca ceremony is the spirits, also called “doctors,” or *doctorcitos*. The ayahuasqueros have a special relationship with certain spirits with which they work closely. Participants also report encountering spirit doctors who manipulate their body with the purpose of healing them. Ayahuasqueros might employ spirits for future protection and consult them to heal a patient. The spirits tell them what to do, for example, if they need to direct energy to a person with the schacapa, tell them when enough energy has been directed to a person, and help manage the chaos of energy that might ensue during the ceremony. Each plant, human, or object has multiple spirits that are arranged hierarchically. When invoking a spirit, the shamans call the chief spirit of each plant or *madre de la planta*. The madres determine what is needed and send the appropriate spirit to each person. I was often told that one has to be receptive to receive help from the spirits.

Although participants often discussed the healing process in terms of “becoming their own shaman,” it is often with the help of these spirits and after being able to “open up” to the spirit world that successful healing can take place. Some interviewees have described quite dramatic interactions with the spirits that assist in their healing. One of them said that once the spirits performed open-heart surgery on him. He believed that the visions are like anesthesia and are meant to distract someone while they are doing their healing work. This idea, that the visions are really a distraction and not the actual purpose of the ayahuasca experience, was shared by many. Navigating the visionary experience can be tricky for many reasons. One of the ayahuasqueros said that sometimes spirits offer things to the participants. Before a ceremony, he said that if these spirits offer flowers, stones, or fruit participants could accept them, but warned them not to take anything red or black because these are things associated with sorcery.

Spirits are very important when it comes to recuperating soul fragments, which was perceived as a very common condition and a result of modern lifestyle. Participants were encouraged to ask the spirits to bring back the fragments of their soul. People were encouraged to ask the spirits for help, and they were assured that they would provide guidance. They were also told to ask for what they want to get rid of to be taken away or ask for what they wanted to be done on them directly from the spirits. During the ceremony, they were also told to let go of anything that does not serve them, and the ayahuasqueros would handle that energy and send it away.

■
ICAROS

An important element that deserves a longer discussion is the *icaros*, the power and healing songs that are sung throughout the ceremony and have been studied extensively (Dobkin de Rios 1973; Luna 1986; Brabec de Mori 2002; Demange 2002; Bustos 2008). Icaros are the vehicle through which the ayahuasquero will infuse an object or the brew with power—whether healing, cleansing, or harmful—and transmit this energy to the patient. There are icaros that are meant to do a variety of things such as heal, protect, and defend against enemies; call the *mareación*⁶; call the spirits; take the *mareación* away; remove negative energy; and even win the love of a woman (*huarmi icaros*). Another purpose is communicating with the spirits of the plants invoked in the icaros. By invoking them, icaros contain the powers of the healing or curative plants. At the beginning of the ceremony, ayahuasqueros sing icaros in the individual servings of the brew using the name of the participants for their protection and to solicit a certain outcome. Then they invoke the *mareación* as well as the plant and animal spirits and put their curative powers inside the patients’ bodies. I was told that during the ceremony sometimes patients feel stronger while other times they may initially feel weaker because the power of the spirits combats the spirit of the patient while at the same time strengthening it. Most ayahuasqueros advised participants to concentrate on the icaros during the ceremony, especially if they were having a hard time or were afraid. One ayahuasquero said that the icaros in themselves are 100 percent healing (*cien por ciento curativos*).

A very common phenomenon related to the icaros is that of synesthesia, where participants say they can literally “see” the music. Every time there is a change in song the visions change. In fact, it is said that ayahuasqueros can move or manipulate a person’s visions or state of mind by using different icaros at different times or change the overall energy and feeling of the ceremony. I have attended ceremonies where the energy of the icaros was very powerful and others where it was calm, and this affected how people reacted. What is important here, and causes these dramatic changes, are not the words of the icaro, which tend to be repetitive and variations of the same themes, but the intonation in which they are sang. Some icaros might be whistled or whispered, especially at the beginning of the ceremony when they want to attract the spirits, while they can become much more intense later in the ceremony.

The icaros are said to be given to ayahuasqueros directly by the spirits during their apprenticeship, in ceremony, or when dieting, and in the course of their lives they might accumulate more icaros. Icaros are learned directly from the spirits; shamans hear the icaros from the plants, and they are told to

follow them. They also learn and receive the icaros of their teacher, which they learn and follow during their apprenticeship. This is what an ethnographer Angelika Gebhart-Sayer (1986) had to say about the transmission of icaros from the spirits to the ayahuasquero:

Under Ayahuasca influence, the shaman perceives, from the spirit world, incomprehensible, often chaotic, information in the form of luminous designs. He then “domesticates” this information by converting it into various aesthetic notions: geometric patterns, melodies/rhythm and fragrance which play a key psychological and spiritual role for both the patient and society. Only through this mediating step the awesome and incomprehensible become applicable corpues of shamanic cognition suitable for the mundane village. [Luna 1986:62]

Ownership of the icaros is important and the fear that others will copy their icaros is very common among ayahuasqueros (some will not allow recording of the ceremonies for this reason). The more common strategy used to avoid copying of the icaros is using a mix of words from native languages, especially Quechua, or what they call spirit language that is difficult to decipher and copy. I was told by an ayahuasquero that, if I wanted to be a shaman, I should use as many obscure words as possible, to make my icaros more powerful and more difficult for others to learn. One ayahuasquero used words from Spanish, Quechua, Shipibo, Campa, and Urarina in her icaros. Another used a mixture of Cocama, Spanish, and Quechua. In addition, at the end of familiar words ayahuasqueros add a short suffix that usually does not add a particular meaning to the word and sometimes was referred to as “spirit language.” I was told that the meaning of a word is not as important as the feeling of it; the way the ayahuasquero feels at the moment is what determines the words. For example, the word *soplarenge*, which is repeated in many icaros, comprised by the Spanish word *sopla* (blow) and the suffix *renge*, which is very common, inserted by the ayahuasquero. Another common suffix is *ini*.

On the other hand, I was told by the most respected ayahuasquero in the area that it is not enough to learn an icaro and sing it. Each icaro has a particular power or energy that can only be transmitted by the master ayahuasquero to the apprentice by will or by the spirits themselves—when they give the icaro to the ayahuasquero. Therefore, although someone can copy someone’s icaros and sing them in ceremony, these icaros have no power and therefore are not able to heal, protect, or perform any other function. “The icaros come from inside the body of the shaman,” one ayahuasquero told me showing his belly. He added that he uses some of the icaros of his teacher as well as his own. He explained that he took the base (spinal cord as he put it) from his teacher and developed his own ritual. This is very common in

shamanism. There is a degree of following tradition and a lot of room for each individual ayahuasquero’s creativity. I was also told that there are icaros that one ayahuasquero can sing better than others because they created them and “own” their energy. In addition, shamans feel every person’s energy and can take the same icaro to a different direction, something that someone who does not own the icaro cannot do.

An example of an icaro I recorded shows the type of language used in it:

<i>cielo, cielo ayahuascacitoini</i>	<i>Calling to the cielo⁷ ayahuasca</i>
<i>cielo, cielo ayahuascacitoini</i>	<i>Calling to the cielo ayahuasca</i>
<i>alto manta troncocitoini</i>	<i>Calling to the mother trunk</i>
<i>puntaymanta cogocito</i>	<i>To the budding leaf growth</i>
<i>florcitangi oloroso cuerpocito ini</i>	<i>To the fragrant flowers to the body</i>
<i>cielo, cielo ayahuascacitoini</i>	<i>Calling to the cielo ayahuasca</i>
<i>cielo, cielo ayahuascacitoini</i>	<i>Calling to the cielo ayahuasca</i>
<i>alto manta troncocito</i>	<i>Calling to the mother trunk</i>
<i>puntaymanta cogocito</i>	<i>To the budding leaf growth</i>
<i>florcitangi oloroso cuerpocito ini</i>	<i>To the fragrant flowers to the body</i>
<i>brilla, brilla, pura pura medicina</i>	<i>Shine, shine, pure, pure medicine</i>
<i>ninininini</i>	<i>ninininini</i>
<i>cielo, cielo ayahuascacitoini</i>	<i>Calling to the cielo ayahuasca</i>
<i>cielo, cielo ayahuascacitoini</i>	<i>Calling to the cielo ayahuasca</i>
<i>brilla, brilla, pura pura medicina</i>	<i>Shine, shine, pure pure medicine</i>
<i>nanananayanayy</i>	<i>nanananayanayy</i>

[Research Data, July 2007]

An icaro can last for up to an hour or longer. However, some ayahuasqueros sing icaros that are shorter with a more standardized structure resembling songs. This might be a new development due to tourism as some ayahuasqueros record their icaros and sell them to the tourists in the form of CDs. Below is an example of such an icaro:

<i>Oh poderoso Apu</i>	<i>Yura yura yuraicito, cigarunchi, cuna</i>
<i>Medicuiini medicaini mariri</i>	<i>callari, mariri</i>
<i>Oh poderoso señor</i>	<i>Ayananina . . .</i>
<i>Papa Viejo, bruju runa mariri, mariri</i>	<i>Oh poderoso Apu</i>
<i>Soplarenge, soplarenge coronita</i>	<i>Medicuiini medicaini mariri</i>
<i>Tucu i tucu mariri, mariri</i>	<i>Oh poderoso senor</i>
<i>Limpiarenge cuerpituini, huacicito,</i>	<i>Papa Viejo brujuruna mariri, mariri</i>
<i>mariri</i>	

<i>Limpiarengue, limpiarengue cuerpit- uini, huacicito, mariri soplarengue coronita</i>	<i>cunacayari, mariri Limpiarengue, limpiarengue cuerpit- uini, huacicito, mariri, mariri soplarengue coronita</i>
<i>Tucu i tucu mancuinata mariri, mar- iri, mariri</i>	<i>Tucu i tucu mancuinata mariri, mar- iri, mariri</i>
<i>Llura llura lluraicito, cigarunchi, cu- nacayari, mariri</i>	<i>Mariri, mariri . . .</i>
<i>Llura llura lluraicito, cigarunchi,</i>	

[Research Data, March 2005]

In this icaro, the ayahuasquera invokes a variety of forces, including the mountain spirits of the Andean peoples, which she translated as “father of nature” (*apu*). She invokes the spirit doctors and the magical phlegm (*mariri*; also known as *yachay*), among others. She also mentions the important elements of the ritual, such as blowing smoke on the crown of the head and cleansing the body.

It is often discussed around Iquitos that a particular ayahuasquero knows over a hundred or hundreds of icaros. The more icaros one knows the more powerful they are considered, because that number indicates their long-lasting relationship with the plant spirits. However, in the time that I was there, I only heard a limited number of icaros sang by each ayahuasquero, and in fact there were quite a few similarities between ayahuasqueros. This might be because the vast majority of icaros are for special cases and they rarely get to be used, or it is possible that the claims of knowing a hundred icaros are an exaggeration in the first place.



THE ELEMENT OF CRISIS AS A STEP TOWARD TRANSFORMATION

Several ayahuasqueros point out that ayahuasca is not a medicine that will make you feel better right away; in fact one has to feel bad before they feel better. Paradoxically, this has not made ayahuasca unattractive to Westerners who are believed to seek quick and easy fixes usually in pill form. On the contrary, it was perceived that a sort of crisis had to occur before a successful healing. I was told that sometimes when one asks for the spirits’ help the immediate response is unpleasant because they bring in more energy than the body can handle, but after they pull negative things out, the person feels better. In a manner of speaking, “it gets worse before it gets better.” This way, negative experiences become the springboard for healing and positive transformation. This element of trial is ever present in interviews.

This rhetoric has many similarities to the New Age as discussed by Pike (2004). As biomedicine is perceived as limited, what is missing in Western healing practices is found in non-Western traditions. A common New Age belief is that people become ill when the body’s natural energy flow becomes blocked. Illness indicates that the spirit is out of place—it can be argued that humans create their own illness. On the other hand, suffering and inner chaos are seen in a positive light as they provide opportunities for personal growth (Pike 2004:100). In healing narratives, there is often a crisis before the journey (p. 110). Other important elements are that the ultimate responsibility for health is back to the individual (p. 109); the centrality of self-knowledge and the inner realms of the self are the focus of healing work; and many healing stories describe pulling apart the self and putting it back together (p. 111).

Working with one’s energy is central in this model. Anything that puts one in an altered state of consciousness, such as ayahuasca, is believed to open up one’s energy, making it possible to remove blockages that one might not even know were there. Along these lines, all ayahuasqueros encourage participants to sit up in ceremony as this helps the energy flow in their body and will prevent them from falling asleep, which is considered potentially dangerous as it makes the person more vulnerable to attacks. In one retreat, in the booklet provided to the participants there were a number of suggestions on how to manipulate or ground their energy.

The stage where all this happens is, of course, the body. Lenaerts points out that the ayahuasca sessions are “first and foremost a bodily experience” (2006:60). There is a very corporeal dimension in ayahuasca healing, emphasized by purging, shaking, and other bodily sensations such as feelings of cold. This corporeality, however, is seen as part of the three interconnected dimensions in ayahuasca healing—physical, psychological, spiritual. The ayahuasca experience is very intense on the body, although discussions would focus on the visionary aspects of the experience. However, many shared that the visions are not the most important aspect of the experience for them.

One particular ayahuasquero, working in a retreat center that focuses a lot on transformative work, explained their philosophy as follows. Both light and darkness exist in the human body, but the darkness tends to hide the light and people usually only see the darkness. This darkness comes from fears, traumas, fright, and negative thoughts. It is important for one to “straighten their energy,” and this can take a long time to achieve. Energy becomes “crossed” (*cruzada*) from anger or negative thoughts, which people “hold onto and do not let go.” One way to combat this crossed energy is to “love everything”—meaning the people and situations in their lives. People were also encouraged to establish straightening their energy as their intent before ceremony as this was the foundation for everything else, such as healing and

transformation. I was told that it is not the ayahuasca that makes one nauseous and sick during ceremony but the negative things residing in the body, such as anger, depression, sadness, and fear that resist leaving the body. This was echoed in the way people discussed someone who had a hard time in a ceremony. They would attribute their hardship to the fact that they had many negative things to purge. For example, I witnessed a ceremony in which a recently arrived young man from Europe participated. The rest of the group were experienced and had had several ceremonies together. His first ceremony was very difficult in the sense that he purged a lot and made very loud noises. The following day, the consensus was that having just come from Europe, he was carrying a lot of negativity that he had to purge, especially because of the lifestyle he led there. It was generally thought that once the purging was over, ayahuasca would take that person to an ecstatic state, a state that is easier for the person and during which helping spirits, medicine, and positive things may enter the body.

In one retreat, participants were told to consider why they were holding onto something and explore whether it was serving them in some way. For example, it was believed that people often hold on to their anger because part of them does not want to let it go. The idea is that when one truly stops wanting it, the anger will go away. An example of how negative feelings work on the body is that fear will build up and cause a sugar craving, which weakens the energetic body. The more one straightens their energy through ayahuasca, the less the body craves things that weaken their energy, such as alcohol, coffee, and sugar. These cravings cause the crossed energy and they are in turn caused by negative feelings. One can protect themselves from such feelings and cravings by smudging, meditation, and concentration. A lot of human suffering was attributed to the fact that the darkness does not want to leave the body and creates confusion. One ayahuasquera explained the effect of negative feelings on the body thusly:

It's quite known that nobody should hold on to rancor against anyone who insulted us. We shouldn't carry any hatred or remorse. Because this makes us hurt ourselves, day by day, as if you were taking a drop of poison; the same way the body is poisoned by the hatred and the rancor. And from there come all the different types of diseases, even cancer.

[Research Data, March 2005]

The same ayahuasquera often encouraged participants to forgive anyone who had hurt them or wronged them in any way so they would not carry any of these negative feelings in their body.

People were also encouraged to ask the spirits to release everything that is blocking them from loving themselves. Self-love was seen as a way to

transform and unblock energy and as a step to healing. Following, is part of a speech that an ayahuasquero gave during a ceremony that exemplifies this idea:

*Everything you don't want anymore,
Give it back,
Just give it back.
It's that easy, just give it back.
It's not scary it's not hard.
Just give it back.
You can release it,
Just give it back.
Anything you don't want anymore,
Just give it back.
It's super easy,
Just give it back.
You don't want the anger,
Give it back.
Remember that there is good in you.
Give it back.
Whatever it is,
Just give it back.
You don't need it anymore.
You don't want it anymore.
Give it back.
There is nothing you give you can't
get back.
Give it back.
This is not hard.
You don't have to fight.
You don't have to fight it in our-
selves.
You just have to give it back.
Whatever it is
Give it back.*

*Whatever you don't want anymore.
Give it back.
You know, that thing that is bottled
up inside you
Just give it back
Just give it back.
It wants to fly away.
All you have to do is just relax and
give it back.
If you don't, we can't take it back.
You are the ones that hold it in.
Give it back.
Everybody that is here with low self-
esteem
Just give it back.
Love yourself.
Just love yourself.
Love your body
Everybody.
Want experience?
Love yourself.
You wanna transform?
Love yourself.
You wanna heal?
Love yourself.
Do it because you can, not for any
other reason.
Just love yourself.
For those who wanna feel beautiful,
Love yourself.
We fight ourselves over and over and
over...*

Love your body,
 Love your mind,
 Love your brain,
 Love your ego,
 Just love it!
 Say yes to it.
 Just say yes to it.
 We spend all day saying no,
 Say yes to my body,
 Say yes to my mind,
 Say yes to my heart,
 Say yes to myself.
 God knows enough other people said
 no.
 I can always say yes.
 Yes.
 I can always love myself.
 The moment you love yourself
 The moment you'll be healed.
 That's it, just love yourself.
 Do it once and see what happens.
 If anything blocks you from doing it,
 release it.
 Just let it go.
 Anything blocking you,
 Just let it go.
 You don't have to fight it,
 Just let it go.
 If it's fear and it makes you sick,
 Relax and just let it go and watch it
 fly away.
 And then see how you feel.
 How does it make you feel?
 [. . .]
 End the inner madness

Just do it!
 Any conflict in you is yours today,
 Any suffering is yours today,
 Any anger is yours today, yours.
 Not anybody else's, it's yours.
 Decide for yourself if you want it, if
 you do keep it.
 If you don't, let it go.
 If you catch yourself going back to it,
 let it go.
 Remember to love yourself.
 And it will all go.
 It's that easy guys.
 Love yourself.
 Love your body,
 Love your mind,
 Love all your components,
 Love all your parts.
 Love your genitals [laughter by sev-
 eral people],
 They are too big,
 They are too small,
 They are too wrinkly,
 They are too this,
 They are too that.
 Love them!
 End the conflict.
 Love all the components that make
 up you.
 Just love them!
 Love. Them!
 Not because I said so, but because
 you can.
 Do it once and tell me how you feel.
 [Research Data, July 2007]

Later, he asked people to focus their awareness on their hearts. Part of this approach is the focus on the heart, the physical organ, which is perceived as doing much more than “pumping blood.” What is also important in this model is that the “patient” is not passive and relying on the expert to heal them but takes an active role and full responsibility for their healing and future well-being, something encouraged by most ayahuasqueros I worked with.

Participants emphasized that one has to “work” on their healing; people predominantly used the word “work” for what they do during a ceremony. Although many of the interviewees reported health benefits or improvement with a health issue they were having, no dramatic or miraculous cases were reported. On the contrary, they all recognized that there was still a lot of work that needed to be done, and even when they felt they were on a good track they recognized that it was a long process and that they needed to continue pursuing this further.



CONCLUSION

I showed that in the context of shamanic tourism, healing is perceived in very specific ways. Things that cause imbalance, usually stemming from negative feelings in the body, need to be expelled or extracted to achieve equilibrium. Often, a crisis has to occur before a successful healing and negative experiences become a catalyst for healing and positive transformation. In addition, a big part of the responsibility for healing lies with the patient, and healing is seen as a process rather than a singular event. Although I have shown elsewhere (Fotiou 2010) that shamanic tourism can be highly problematic, it is important to look at this phenomenon within a discourse that sees plant hallucinogens as sacraments and seeks their use in a ritual context with healing intentions. While my research has primarily focused on the cultural construction of healing in this particular context, future research could focus on the healing effects of ayahuasca using more quantitative methodology.



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NOTES

1. Traditional folk healing practice.
2. Also see Anderson's article in this issue.
3. Cheap cologne that can be bought at the market of Belén, usually of the brand Murray and Lanman.
4. Sugarcane liquor.
5. This is rue, *Ruta graveolens*. A local friend also told me that she and her husband used ruda on their altar for ceremonies. At the market, one can also buy soap made of ruda; on the package it says that it is good for luck, money, and love. I was told it was good to wash with this soap while dieting.
6. From the verb *marearse*, meaning to feel sick and dizzy. It refers to the altered state induced by ayahuasca.
7. I do not translate the word *cielo* (sky/heaven) because it refers to the type of ayahuasca used most commonly in the area and is known as "cielo ayahuasca." It is not clear if it is actually a different species. Other types of ayahuasca used are *trueno* (thunder) ayahuasca and ayahuasca *negra* (black ayahuasca). They are said to get their names from their distinctive effects.

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