Chapter 12
The Therapeutic Use of Ayahuasca in Grief

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Introduction

The word "ayahuasca" is derived from the Quechua language, which is variously interpreted as "dead person, spirit, soul, or ancestor," while *huasca* means "rope or vine" (Metzner 2006). Although, for some people, ayahuasca infers a direct relation between the plant and the realms of spirits – and the dead – few scientific studies have focused on its therapeutic potential for grief and bereavement. The first study compared the intensity of the suffering experienced after the loss of a loved one, over a maximum period of 5 years, between a group of people who took ayahuasca and a group of people who attended peer-support groups (Gonzalez et al. 2017). The researchers found that participants who reported having at least one meaningful experience with ayahuasca, in relation to their grieving process, presented grief that was less intense than the reported grief of the people who attended peer-support groups for an average period of 1 year. In order to gain a deeper understanding of the relation between the ayahuasca experience and the processing of grief, qualitative content analysis of the study participants' experience reports was performed. Three subthemes emerged that were identified within the analyzed narratives: emotional release, biographical memories, and experiences of contact with the deceased.

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The second study examined the course of grief over 1 year of follow-up in a bereaved sample that attended the Temple of the Way of Light ("the Temple" in what follows), a healing center located close to the city of Iquitos in the Peruvian Amazon (González et al. 2020). Situated at the intersection between the indigenous Shipibo medical practice and a variety of psychospiritual and integrative approaches, the Temple emphasizes ayahuasca as a vehicle for healing, individual transformation, and growth. Results of this study showed a significant improvement in grief after the Temple stay, being maintained over 1-year follow-up. In addition, a subgroup analysis performed in a representative subsample showed the improvement in grief symptoms were due to the effect of their stay at the center and not merely the passing of time.

This present chapter includes experiences from some of the Western subjects who participated in this last study. Accordingly, this chapter adopts a dual lens from which to examine the phenomena observed. From an *etic* point of view, and framed within current concepts and theory in the psychology of grief, we propose some possible therapeutic implications in relation to the emergent psychological content described by the grieving participants following their ayahuasca experiences. From an *emic* point of view, we present the voices of the participants as they share their first-person understanding and experiential knowledge regarding the benefits derived from their experiences. Furthermore, we share voice with four Shipibo ayahuasca practitioners (*onaya*[1]) who work at the Temple, with the intention of establishing an intercultural and inter-epistemic dialogue that enriches our understanding of grief and bereavement and further illuminates how ayahuasca can help us integrate and process painful human losses.

The reports that follow were gathered in the context of an observational study promoted by the International Center for Ethnobotanical Education, Research, and Service (ICEERS) and the Beckley Foundation and took place at the Temple of the Way of Light. The goal of the study is to evaluate the long-term effects that ayahuasca may have on personal well-being as well as its therapeutic potentials in relation to a variety of psychopathological symptoms as measured in specific and distinct samples of people who present symptoms of depression, anxiety, posttraumatic stress, and grief.

The reports presented in this chapter belong to the grief sample (n = 50) and were collected 15 days after attending a 9-, 12-, 13-day, or 3-week-long retreat at the Temple, where they participated in 4–9 ayahuasca ceremonies. Qualitative data for the present chapter was collected in a written, free-style form, prompted by an open-ended segment at the end of a battery of mostly quantitative measurements that subjects received at the aforementioned time intervals. For our follow-up chapters, we are also analyzing additional qualitative data collected through presential,

[1] Onaya (sometimes *onanya*), from the Shipibo *oni* (ayahuasca; also knowledge, to know) and the suffix *-ya* ("one who knows"), is the Shipibo auto-denomination for curandero, one of the three categories of healers in the Shipibo system, and specialized in the knowledge of plants and command of plant spirits. Throughout this chapter, the terms "onaya," "healer," and "curandero" have been used interchangeably.

semi-structured interviews, gathered by a team member on-site who is also a facilitator in some of the workshops.

Qualitative semi-inductive content analysis of these reports enriches and enlarges the concepts and categories previously identified in the study about the potential use of ayahuasca in grief therapy (González et al. 2017). To be included in the study, participants had to report going through a grieving process related to the loss of a loved one. Recognizing that the concept of "grief" is notoriously difficult to delimitate, in this study, we assume Faschingbauer et al.'s (1987) definition according to which the grief process presents the following components: (a) nonacceptance of a loss, (b) yearning or missing the deceased, and (c) crying or sadness. The reports that were subject to qualitative semi-inductive content analysis (Potter and Levine-Donnerstein 1999) resulted from the participants' answers to the question "Did you have an ayahuasca experience that you feel directly affected your grief?"; if the participant offered an affirmative answer, he received the following request: "Please describe your personal experience of how ayahuasca has influenced your grief. You can extend the description as much as necessary."

Psychological Processes That Could Mediate Grief Adaptation

Emotional Processing

People who undergo a grief process might suffer from feelings of yearning, loneliness, and profound sadness for varying periods of time. The crying that is provoked by these feelings has an adaptive function since, for example, the tears that result from emotional pain contain a substantial amount of stress-related hormones, such as prolactin or corticotrophin. Crying promotes their elimination from the body, hence diminishing the mourner's subjective discomfort (Frey and Langseth 1985). According to Hill and Martin, this hormonal release diminishes the emotional load associated with the cognitive contents that implicitly come with this pain, thus favoring the psychological reorganization in relation to the subject of pain (1997). Most participants in our study mention this type of emotional confrontation, which seems to lessen the pain and the psychosomatic load even after the dissipation of the ayahuasca's immediate effects. However, participants can understand the therapeutic effects derived from an emotional confrontation differently. For some people, confronting their pain is a way to gain relief from psychosomatic symptoms. A young woman who lost her father to suicide after being in an ambiguous relationship with him throughout her life expressed such an emotional release:

> Ayahuasca made very clear how much grief, and what kind, I was holding in my body from childhood and it forced me to sit with it during ceremony. And in sitting with it, I was able

> to release a big portion of it. I am still having realizations of myself and the grief I had pushed away for so many years. Every day I feel a little clearer and lighter! (V.1[2])

> For others, the emotional confrontation is valuable and meaningful as an act of love or as a way of honoring the deceased or the mourning process:
>
> Ayahuasca helped me understand that the sadness I have felt right after… the suicide of my younger brother, and the sadness that I allowed myself to feel during the ayahuasca ceremony, is just another expression of the love I had for him, something that it is infinite and powerful. (V.15)

> In one of the ceremonies, I asked Aya [ayahuasca] to help me feel my grief. Rather than looking and reviewing the stories associated with the many losses I've had in my life, Aya had me sit with my grief. I actually physically experienced in my body the emotion of grief as a heaviness, pressing my shoulders and back toward the earth, as an absence of any color except shades of grey. Even the visions were grey. Aya specifically told me not to go into the stories, as they were a distraction from the feelings. She [ayahuasca] also told me that by being with the feelings I was honoring the experiences, the losses, and myself. (V.3)

A 37-year-old woman who lost an intimate friend in a car crash found the emotional pain experienced under the effects of ayahuasca to be so intense that it helped her put her daily pain in perspective:

> Five out of the seven ceremonies my grief was addressed with the ayahuasca. I went deep into the state of grief and shock and felt it very strongly… so in a way I feel like I felt my grief as hard as I am going to feel it. Time will tell. (V.2)

Another possible outcome, however, is the absence of emotional arousal despite increased contact with painful psychological content and the release of its attached psychophysiological reactions. A woman who lost her brother to a car crash describes her experience:

> I dealt directly with the death of my brother during ceremony. The strange thing was the uncontrollable tears I cried in which I was an observer to my body's response to the grief. I sat there with tears flowing but felt very numb to any pain. (V.16)

In any case, the effects of ayahuasca cannot be considered independently from the ceremonial setting in which the experience occurs. For many participants, the emotional release is directly linked to the *icaros*, the healing chants of the Shipibo healers (see next section), while the release of psychosomatic tension is directly linked with the purging,[3] whether by vomiting or defecating: "Healers singing to me and feelings of sadness being pulled out of me. Purging and feeling packets of sadness, almost like losing the part of me that was causing sadness" (V.17). "I purged at least nine times and each time felt as if I was letting go of grief that had been trapped in my body" (V.3).

[2] "V" stands for "visitor." The number following was assigned to the participants to maintain confidentiality.

[3] Ayahuasca has emetic properties, and "purging," the act of vomiting, defecating, shaking, crying, laughing, and many other forms of psychosomatic release, is a primary dimension of its healing potential, according to the vast majority of both indigenous and Western practitioners.

Although intense emotions that arise with the loss of a loved one are inevitable, in some people the feeling of sadness may trigger defense mechanisms whose purpose is to allow the person to dampen or evade his pain. Circumventing sadness, however, does not contribute toward the resolution of grief, and masking or avoiding uncomfortable feelings could lead to emotional blunting and can pave the way for the emergence of feelings such as rage and bitterness that can cause future psychosomatic problems. In this scenario, cognitive-behavioral therapy uses emotional confrontation techniques such as "imagined revisiting" or "prolonged exposure" with the intention of increasing acceptance of the reality of loss (Boelen et al. 2006). For some people, it seems, ayahuasca – such as cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) – may help the person fully experience their feelings, uncomfortable as they may be, without triggering defense mechanisms that may have hindered the grieving process through evasion or distraction.

In our study, we came across narratives of emotional confrontation that emerged in cases where experiences of loss may have been masked or avoided for prolonged periods of time. These were reported by women who had lost their mothers:

> The source of my grief,… my mother's suicide, was directly and clearly addressed in the ceremonies. This has been avoided for over years, and has shaped a great deal of my life. I feel as though a great deal of weight has been lifted off of me. I am very hopeful for my future now. (V.14)

> I had suppressed so many tears and I was finally able to release all of my grief so that it was no longer insurmountable. I was able to release emotions and feelings that I did not release when my mother passed away many years ago. Now I am free to love her and appreciate her life because my grief does not cloud me like it did (V.18).

Finally, one participant who lost a loved one during her childhood refers to a cathartic confrontation with the pain that remained hidden throughout her adult life. This 41-year-old woman arrived at the Temple with the intention of dealing with the loss of her mother and her father:

> I have had several people close to me die, many in sudden and unexpected ways, as a child. One was the suicide of my brother. Although I had drank ayahuasca before, I had been taking it to work with other deaths and other issues. My first night drinking at the Temple, I was taken to the period following my brother's suicide and had a cathartic cry and some time to explore the anger resulting from what happened surrounding this event. (V.13)

Making Meaning of the Past and Reconstructing Identity

The grieving process may affect an individual's identity and social environment. The persistent complex bereavement disorder, as formulated in the fifth edition of the American Psychiatric Association's (APA) *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-5) (APA 2013), includes "confusion about one's role in life or a diminished sense of one's identity" (p. 970) as one of the symptoms in the social identity disruption section. Grief may exert changes in a person's identity at

various levels, including the personal, the social, the cultural, and the spiritual. For example, losing a long-term partner entails a change in marital status, as the person transitions from a married status to that of a widow or widower. Although contingent to culture and social status, such a life event has immediate repercussions and thoroughly transforms everyday roles. On the other hand, grief is never just about the loss of the other; losing a loved one necessarily entails the loss of a part of who we are, the part of our identity that we constructed in relation to that person, and the way that we see ourselves reflected through their eyes. In the timeless words of Vygotsky (Rieber and Carton 1987): "Through others, we become ourselves" (p. 161).

In our study, we have gathered numerous narratives that highlight the impact that the ayahuasca experiences can have on helping reconstruct and develop the identity of individuals going through a grieving process. One participant shares:

> Since the Temple, I realize the grief is more about the parts of myself that I had lost as a result of living with the grief…. I am really enjoying getting to know the parts of myself that were lost. All of my ceremonies contributed to this. The second ceremony was about strength, the third was about joy, the fourth was about dignity. All of these experiences have really helped me to move past feeling like I had no choices. (V4)

The ways in which we choose to reconstruct our life's histories, particularly through highly accessible and vivid personal memories, is closely related to the way in which we see ourselves and project our futures (Baerger and McAdams 1999). Narrative therapy, thus, emphasizes the importance of reassigning meanings to painful biographical episodes in the construction and inclusion of new scripts that could have been understated in the client's reports about their life history (Draucker 2003). This enables the process of reconstructing the life history while simultaneously helping the griever construct a more adaptive and empowering identity. However, in cases where the relationship with the deceased was an ambiguous one, additional challenges may emerge: the distorted reflection of who we are in the eyes of the deceased remains frozen, and an opportunity to evolve and recover that repaired sense of self is lost (Betz and Thorngren 2006).

Such an example comes from a man who lost his father, with whom he had had an ambiguous relationship throughout his life. He describes how ayahuasca helped him shed new light over meaningful biographical episodes that had affected his ability to accept and love himself:

> Ayahuasca helped me to see all of the situations in my life where these problems with self-love had stemmed from and how my thought processes during these times of distress shaped the person I was today. It opened my mind to see the troubles that I had created in my own mind over the years of my life and let me process these events properly. Ayahuasca shined a light on these things and showed me what I needed to see and enabled me to heal myself. (V12)

Another male participant, who lost his emotionally abusive mother to addiction, describes how ayahuasca helped him distinguish and reassign meaning to a previously unrecognized dimension of grief linked to a negative personal belief system that compromised his self-esteem:

> I think I misunderstood my grief as being solely related to external physical events, when, in fact, much of it was also tied to self-limited internal beliefs that separated me from my best self. The opportunity to witness those self-limiting beliefs, confront them with logic, reason, and compassion, and ultimately to change them, resolved such a strong store of grief within me. I am no longer separated from myself, or I am closer and more loving with myself than I was before. I believe I am beautiful, strong, a success, and good enough. I am no longer grieving those parts of me. Though I still have a journey to go on with my grief related to external events, I do so going forward with a new spirit. (V.11)

Reassigning meaning to a traumatic event is another approach to the process of identity reconstruction. The ability to assign new meanings to trauma may open new directions in ways to deal with future challenges, and it is associated with the promotion of resilience (Mancini and Bonanno 2006). As one of the participants writes: "I feel less pain and think of myself less as a victim of circumstance… I have more faith in the idea that there is a purpose to my trauma and life" (V19).

Lastly, we want to note that the opportunity to review biographical episodes under the effects of ayahuasca may increase empathy toward others who are suffering and increase forgiveness of oneself and others. Increased empathy and compassion for others have been described as signs of the personal growth derived from the grieving process (Lichtenthal et al. 2013). However, the role that forgiveness, both to self and others, may play in these kinds of transformative processes has barely been addressed in the scientific literature. Here are two examples from our sample: "During my first ceremony I was shown and experienced such incredible kindness, compassion, and love. I was also shown and experienced the pain of another person and therefore my sense of compassion has really expanded" (V.4).

> During ceremony, I was able to come to terms with everything that had happened with my ex-husband. I was able to forgive him for all the bad things he'd done, and I was able to forgive myself for the part I had played during our relationship. I realized how his death was somewhat like a rebirth for me and has allowed me to find my spiritual path and develop into a person that I'm a lot happier being, compared to when I was with my ex-husband. (V.6)

Continuing Bonds with the Deceased

Until recently, the psychoanalytical legacy of Freud, first expressed in *Mourning and Melancholia* (1924), dictated that the process of overcoming grief inevitably implied a detachment from the deceased, an act of letting go and saying goodbye forever. However, recent scientific research has evidenced the wide range of benefits associated with remaining attached to our loved ones, regardless of his or her physical absence (Klass and Steffen 2017). Not long ago, such a process might have resulted in the pathologization of the griever and the grieving process, as it contradicted the dominant discourse. Currently, however, the continuation of bonds with the deceased has become one of the major goals for a number of clinical models and approaches to the treatment of complicated grief (Neimeyer et al. 2006).

In our study, we find various narratives that describe experiences of contact or reunion with the deceased loved one. These experiences may represent significant

therapeutic potential, as they allow seemingly unprecedented and exceptional psychological content to emerge. This has added value for the therapeutic application of ayahuasca in grief, as it may provide results that could hardly be achieved by other psychotherapeutic techniques, such as various forms of imaginal psychotherapeutic dialogues with the deceased (Shear 2010). When these techniques are used in psychotherapy, the griever intentionally projects the content that arises from this encounter. However, through the mediation of ayahuasca, the contact with the deceased may occur spontaneously, unrelated to the conscious expectations of the person. These experiences are often accompanied by a significant emotional intensity that may be partly responsible for the therapeutic impact of the experience. The following participants describe this:

> I mourned during some ceremonies. My dad came to mind and I cried a lot. I felt very close to him in one ceremony, like he was with me. I felt very connected. I also got a very clear message to appreciate what I do have, including my mother, who is still alive. (V.7)

> From the very first ceremony, one of the shamans sang me an icaro that felt like a funeral song, and I was able to tap into some deep grieving. The ceremony helped me feel a deeper connection with my deceased mother, her energy, her memories, her legacy, and helped me put death in general into context … This has really helped my grieving process and my ability to feel what I need to feel to move through difficult emotions. (V.5)

Kernberg defines an internal representation as "the parts of the self in the bond with the person, characterizations and thematic memories of the person, and the emotional states connected with the characterizations and memories" (as cited in Klass 2017, p. 3). In our sample, most narratives that describe these types of contact with the deceased seem to transform the internal representation the participants had of their loved ones. Accordingly, this transformation has a direct impact on the relationship that is later kept with the deceased. As far as we are aware, this process is yet to be described in the scientific literature and may result in new and unprecedented therapeutic approaches. The reports that follow refer to cases where the internal representation of the deceased is surpassed by a new archetypical image that widens and enriches the previous representation, imbuing it with novel and deeper meanings. A man who recently lost his grandfather describes:

> I was visited by my grandfather who passed away in the form of a golden light that spoke to me. He told me how proud of me he is, and how thankful he is that I was able to be there for his death. I feel at peace with his death in a way I never did before. (V.20)

While being concerned for the well-being of the deceased loved one cannot be framed logically within the boundaries of our Western, rational worldview, many grievers express an "irrational" worry about the departed, particularly in cases where the death event was painful or where death occurred before resolution of important aspects was achieved. So far, our data points out to the potential therapeutic effect achieved by "witnessing" the well-being of a deceased loved one following death and the subsequent reduction of the griever's concerns. The following fragment is from a young Buddhist man who lost his grandmother to a car crash

and, 10 months later, lost his grandfather – the driver at the time of the accident – to what is known as "broken heart syndrome":

> On my second ceremony, the ayahuasca showed me my grandparents in spirit form. My grandfather was a proud, silent dragon; my grandmother a sweet little monkey. They stayed with me for a long time, maybe 30 to 45 minutes, while I cried for them without thinking of any complications from the time they died. (V.8)

This 56-year-old woman that lost her son in an accident describes:

> Ayahuasca was very loving and gentle with me. I have a direct contact with my son. I could talk with him again and he told me all the love and care he still has for me. He talked to me by being a star very big and bright. Now I feel he is part of me. The loss-feeling diminished because, now the separation does not exist. (V.21)

Lastly, this kind of experiences may also promote change in the representation of the space occupied by the deceased in relation to his or her former living space. Changes in the representation the griever has of the place the loved one was at the moment of their death can also impact and change the way the griever relates to the deceased. This 44-year-old woman, whose mother committed suicide 4 years ago, explains the relief she felt by experiencing her mother's spirit being able to move on:

> In my very first ceremony, Maestra Alicia saw a spirit of a dead person next to me and she helped that spirit to the light. I, at that very exact time, felt that she was sending my deceased mother to the light. I cried a lot because it felt like a big letting go, but I was also very relieved that my mom finally could go to the light. After the ceremony, I felt a big relief and ever since it feels much less dense and grateful when I think of her. (V.22)

Finding Existential Meaning

The search for existential meaning is a recurrent concern for people dealing with the loss of a loved one or when facing their own death. "What is the meaning of life?" "What happens when we die?" These questions encompass an additional burden when someone passes away before their expected time, seeming to violate our perception of what is just (Spillers 2007). In these situations, even religious people may get angry at God, asking questions such as "Where were you when this happened?" "If you are that powerful, why don't you bring them back?" Feelings of frustration, hopelessness, and vulnerability that arise from a lack of answers to these questions push the griever into an existential search.

The ability to make sense of life and death is the variable that better predicts adaptation during the grief process (Gillies and Neimeyer 2006). Presently, the World Health Organization recognizes the important role that spirituality and spiritual development play in our health and well-being (Chuengsatiansup 2003). The variety of ways in which ayahuasca enhances and promotes spiritual development and growth has been widely researched (Trichter et al. 2009; Tupper 2009) and is a recurrent theme in our data. The following excerpt belongs to the report of a

participant who experienced great anxiety related to the fear of losing his loved ones and friends, a situation we could label as "anticipated grief":

> Ayahuasca helped me deal with the anxiety I'd get when worrying about my family and friends dying. One thing that helped me reduce my anxiety around death was seeing the spirit world and realizing our spirits never die. This was a rough experience, but I feel it helped me reduce my stress around the fear of death. (V.9)

The following excerpt is from a participant who lost his brother following a prolonged illness. Although secular and unattached to any religion, his experience resembles descriptions of the cycles of Hindu reincarnation (Martinez 2015):

> I was shown cycles of life, death, and rebirth. It no longer seems like an "end" to die but just another sort of beginning. Having faith in the universe restored has made my grief seem more like a part of a cycle, rather than the totality of my existence. (V23)

Another report offers an example of what could be considered a transpersonal experience: "Ayahuasca showed me the interconnectedness of the universe and all life. The experiences I had showed me that death is not to be feared" (V.10). Finally, as this other participant showss, these experiences can promote personal posttraumatic growth by enhancing a new way of relating with life, with death, and with existence: "It's hard to put into words, but the ayahuasca helped me have a larger, more expansive, and more dynamic relationship to life, death, and energy" (V.5).

Summary

To summarize, our approach, so far, has focused in juxtaposing a number of therapeutic concepts and approaches found in the literature with experiences that seem to have a direct relation to the grieving processes of the participants. These concepts and approaches relate to distinctive psychological theories that contribute to our understanding of the human experience of grief: from the cognitive-behavioral model to the narrative constructivist model, from the psychodynamic approaches to transpersonal psychology, among others.

Through our data, we conclude that the therapeutic potential of ayahuasca in relation to the grieving process can be related to experiences of emotional confrontation. We understand emotional confrontation to manifest variously as a simple expression of relief, as a way of honoring the deceased, as an opportunity to put daily pain into perspective, or as an opportunity to dissociate from pain by assuming a spectators' role toward one's own suffering. We also associate the therapeutic potential of these experiences with instances of emotional confrontation that bring insight into maladaptive patterns that are used as defense mechanisms to dampen or evade pain. Finally, we identify the therapeutic potential implicit in the opportunity to reconstruct one's identity, as it emerges from the chance to release obsolete personal narratives by assigning new meanings to traumatic life events, by preserving bonds with our deceased loved ones, or by exploring existential questions elicited by new spiritual insights.

Furthermore, we have encountered experiences that may shed light into beneficial psychological processes that, as far as we know, are yet to be described in the grief literature. Such seems to be the case when the internal representation of the deceased is transformed or the perception of the space occupied by him or her changes during the ayahuasca experience, providing an opportunity to continue the bonds with our loved ones in a different way, allowing that relationship to keep evolving, even in their physical absence.

To conclude this section, we would like to acknowledge the fact that the observed therapeutic effects of ayahuasca cannot be described solely in terms of psychological and intrapersonal dimensions, since they are embedded in a particular ceremonial and ethnomedical context. Many experiences reported in our data, such as experiences of emotional release, are reported *in relation to* the participant's perception of the role of other setting elements, such as the work of the Shipibo healers, the healing songs, the purgative qualities of the brew, or other environmental or relational factors. We believe that this invites an opportunity to share voice with some of these healers and present their perspectives on what it means to work with Westerners who are seeking help processing their grief.

An Approach to Grief and Grieving from the Shipibo Onaya at the Temple of the Way of Light

For the Shipibo, music is the spirit's language, and singing is the adequate mode of communicating with them (Illius, in Brabec de Mori 2012, p. 79). The purpose of this section is not to present a thorough analysis of the complex and eclectic medical practices of the Shipibo people – and, by extension, the plurality of Shipibo cosmologies – as this is beyond the scope of this chapter and has been done elsewhere (for a variety of perspectives, see Roe 1982; Gebhart-Sayer 1985; Tournon 2002; Brabec de Mori 2012, 2013). Instead, we merely want to complement the rich narratives offered in the previous section with the perspectives of four of the onayas who work at the Temple (two men, Soi and Segundo, and two women, Elena and Sara).[4] We believe that providing an approximation of the way that these four Shipibo healers perceive and address grief among Western participants will help elucidate some of the experiences described by the participants themselves, as they are the main social actors that attend to and are responsible for the ceremonial space from which these experiences emerge.

The data gathered comes from the experience of one of the authors of this chapter, who has been living at the Temple for the last 15 months, and from a focused conversation that he had with these four healers on the subject of grief. Even so, talking about the work of the Shipibo onaya requires an acknowledgment that any

[4] A more thorough interview with one of the onaya, Soi, is offered by Aronovich and Labate in this volume.

attempt to translate practices and phenomena that are rooted in Amazonian ontologies will always be accompanied by what Viveiros de Castro (2004) calls "equivocations": instances of fragmented communication where interlocutors may be sharing the same language to unknowingly refer to different things. However, as De la Cadena (2015) has shown, controlling for equivocation during the task of cultural translation allows us to avoid transforming the dissimilar into the same, maintaining the richness of the divergent perspectives while also making the excesses of each interpretive lens visible.

Making this last point explicit is important; most Western approaches to complex phenomena have a tendency to offer reductive explanatory systems that – whether psychological, biological, or cultural – would fail to account for the primary dimensions in which the Shipibo onaya situate their own practice: In our experience, these include the energetic, the aesthetic, the intersubjective, and the spiritual. By including their voices in this chapter, we also make space to honor the degrees of evidentiality in Shipibo ontology; as Brabec de Mori (2012) has shown, in contrast to naturalistic science where evidence can only be produced by third-person observation, for the Shipibo, it is the direct experience and expression in first person that commands the highest authority, particularly if that person is a respected healer.

In this volume, Aronovich and Labate present an in-depth interview with Soi, one of the Shipibo onaya who also contributed their voice to the present chapter. In the interview, Soi recounts how *oni* – the Shipibo name for ayahuasca – was given to his forefathers by the *chaikoni*, the mythical, invisible guardians of the forest and its people. Chaikoni narratives, as is often the case with oral history and myth, are varied and diverse. For Soi, the chaikoni were those wise ancestors who refused being conquered by the powerful "other," those who had foreseen what the European political and religious conquest would do to their people and their traditions. In Soi's narrative, ayahuasca, oni, was their gift to the bereaved, a remedy that was given to the native survivors to help them cope with the trauma and grief that resulted from the atrocities they endured.

Although the use of ayahuasca is popularly represented as being a millenary and uninterrupted pan-Amazonian tradition, there is very little evidence that its use was widespread in preconquest times (Gow 1994). Soi's account reinforces Brabec de Mori's idea that ayahuasca possibly reached the Ucayali River, the homeland of the Shipibo-Conibo and other Panoan groups, in the course of the last three centuries. This violent cultural exchange was likely a result of the waves of forced migrations and mass displacements of people from different regions and diverse ethnic groups who converged in new spaces regulated by the logic of the missions and, later on, the ruthless global rubber market (Brabec de Mori 2011). It is not farfetched to argue, as presented by Taussig (1987), based on his work on the Putumayo, and perhaps implicit in Soi's account, that the atrocities committed against native populations during these periods catalyzed the transmission and adoption of healing practices that became necessary to address individual and collective pain.

In our conversations with the *onayabo*, who lent their voices to this chapter, we asked them to describe the way in which they help, treat, and heal those *pasajeros* (the term used to refer to participants on a retreat, literally: "passengers") who have

recently lost a very close and loved person. Soi responded that, in these cases, their job focuses on liberating and bringing out the sadness (*tristeza*) that is "blocking one's heart and mind." "Bringing all of that sadness out from the body, out from the spirit, the soul," added Elena, "It takes time. It's like a psychological trauma, a spiritual trauma." According to Soi, "when a person loses a loved one, that person's mind becomes ill, the body becomes ill. That person needs to seek help from a healer, so we can sing that sadness out." But what does it mean to "sing that sadness out?" How can grief be addressed through the medium of song, and how is that achieved? The response of the four onayas was unanimous and simultaneous: icaros!

Like the vast majority of Amazonian societies, Shipibo worlds are constructed upon an animist ontology, to use Descola's ontological approach (Descola 2013). In contrast to the hegemonic ontological discourses of modernity, animist constructions of the world are not rooted in a dualistic separation between nature and culture or subject and object. In animist societies, according to Descola (2013), the human and the nonhuman share the same internal nature; many plants and trees are conceived as persons, imbued with spirit, and, thus, fully able to communicate with humans. Because of this shared internal essence, nonhuman persons lead social and cultural lives, oftentimes, identical to those of men. They possess agency and intentionality. Emerging from an animistic ontology, where humans and plant spirits share a common culture and the subject/object duality is fluid, the Shipibo onaya relies on his ability to commune intimately with the spirits of the plants in order to diagnose and heal. The icaro – the magic song or chant – is the main and most important tool and skill, an embodiment of the power and the medicine that the healer has received and acquired from the different plants that he has "dieted."

"Dieting," in this context, refers to the initiation period and subsequent learning process in which the initiate goes into isolation, abstains from sexual activity, and observes special food restrictions, such as avoiding salt, sugar, fruits, meat, and fatty fish. Oftentimes, the person undergoing the "dieta" will ingest or bathe in a preparation of a specific tree or plant with which they aspire to commune, develop a relationship, and craft an alliance. It is during the initiation period, writes Luna (1986), "in which the novice is purified by the special diet and isolated from people, [that] he is open to the manifestation of the spiritual world. He receives from the spirits the tools of his future practice, in particular, the magic chants or melodies (icaros)" (p. 97).

"The *icaro*," says Soi, "is my connection to the plants." The spirits of each plant have their own icaros, so onayas will often keep "dieting" beyond their initiation period to gain more power by adding more plant spirits to their repertoire of allies. Through the icaro and the medium of sound, the onaya then becomes, transmits, directs, and guides that energy toward the patient. According to Segundo, "The icaros are medicine in its purest form." Furthermore, for Segundo, each plant and icaro hold a different form of medicine, particularly well-suited to treat different conditions, including grief and its physical, emotional, psychological, and spiritual manifestations: "This is why we diet many plants: With their help, we bring out

those energies, that sadness and anguish. For this, we use the *tanti rao,*[5] and we also diet *piri piri,*[6] specially to treat the *susto.*"

"Susto" is a Spanish word that translates as "fear" or "fright." It is a common experience of affliction throughout Latin America and an overarching diagnostic category in many non-hegemonic medical systems. It is included in the DSM-5 (APA 2013) as a culture-bound syndrome and described as "a cultural explanation for distress and misfortune," relating it to "major depressive disorder, posttraumatic stress disorder, other specified or unspecified trauma and stressor-related disorder, somatic symptom disorders" (p. 836–837). The symptomatology of susto is eclectic enough that Tousignant (1979) concludes that more than a syndrome, susto is an overarching strategy "to relate illness events to other levels of reality" (p. 347), with the condition being primarily spiritual in nature.

Susto, as commonly understood by the Shipibo and other Amazonian and Andean healers, is the experience of emotional and spiritual shock that occurs after a frightening or traumatic event, such as an encounter with a dangerous animal or a malevolent spirit. Susto can also result from an alarming illness or from the death of a loved one, and it often entails the loss of one's soul or part of that soul. As we wrote previously, Elena describes the experience of grief as a psychological and spiritual trauma that can lead to *susto*: "When you lose a close family member," Elena points out, "sometimes you can get *asustado* ('with susto')." She continues, "The death of a loved one is a terrible thing! It results in a lot of sorrow, in a lot of emotional and sentimental suffering. One gets susto, a very big susto! It creates an energetic blockage and one can get ill."

Like Segundo, both Elena and Soi agree about the wide-ranging reach of their command of plant spirits: "We have special icaros for different needs," says Maestra Elena. "We have *warmi*[7] icaros, we have medicine icaros… in this case, we would sing medicine icaros, especially the ones that cure susto, the ones that get rid of anguish." Soi adds, "We have icaros that we use specifically to bring the sadness out of the spirit and to help the person be open again to happiness and joy; we have special icaros for that too!" The icaros transcend and exceed their utilitarian value as a medical practice; they are a manifestation of spiritual connection as much as a sublime and refined form of creative and aesthetic expression. They are rooted in immediacy, occupying a space at the intersection between medicine and art: "Any of us can sing an icaro," comments Soi, "Segundo can sing his icaro, or Elena can sing hers. And tomorrow, you can come and ask us about that icaro we sung, but we don't remember it anymore! It comes from the moment, from our connection to that

[5] Jacques Tournon presents the category of *tanti rao* as a subcategory of the *isinma rao*, a native categorization of plants that are used by the Shipibo to modify human behavior. Tanti rao is a subcategory of plants that are used to calm the nerves and are part of the daily plant remedies that the Temple healers provide for workshop participants.

[6] Possibly *Cyperaceae* family. Tournon et al. identify a vast array of plants referred to as "Piri Piri" and so many different uses that it would collectively amount to a panacea (1998).

[7] Love magic is a big part of Shipibo practice. *Warmi* means "woman" in Quechua, and warmi icaros are sung in order to attract or secure the love of a romantic interest.

moment. Tomorrow, in another ceremony, it will be a different icaro." Elena agrees: "One time, a lady came to me after a ceremony. She said, 'I really enjoyed that icaro! Can you sing that for me again?" But I can't do that; I can't remember that! Because that icaro was lived, it was experienced in that moment alone… It was inspired!"

Inspiration is defined as the action or power of moving the intellect or emotions. According to the Merriam-Webster online dictionary, the word "inspire" (*inspirar*, in Spanish) means "to influence, move, or guide by divine or supernatural inspiration, to exert an animating, enlivening, or exalting influence." The word comes from the Latin *inspirare,* "breathe or blow into" (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). The icaro, as we understand it, is a collaborative, inspired, and in-spirited *Ars medica*. "This is an art," exclaims Soi. "An art, an inspired art!" follows Elena. "Inspired," concludes Segundo: "Inspired by the plants, by the spirits of the plants."

To conclude this section, we want to go back to the aforementioned notion of "controlled equivocations" (Viveiros De Castro 2004), with an acknowledgment that any attempt to translate the medicine of the icaros through our own understanding of plant spirits and our understanding of the onayas' experience of plant spirits will always be incomplete. Our goal is humble: to present the perspectives of four of the onayas whose medicine influenced the narratives presented in the previous sections.

Although ayahuasca tends to occupy the spotlight in the narratives of Western participants, for the Shipibo healers, ayahuasca serves mostly as a conduit or bridge facilitating the communion between the onaya and a multiplicity of plant spirits who are incorporated, transmitted, and guided through the voice of the healer to do the actual healing work. The main strategy to treat grief is, thus, to sing inspired icaros that make visible and then dissolve the sadness and the anguish and remove energetic and spiritual blockages caused by a susto originating in the traumatic experience of loss, allowing the numb person to feel that which has been suppressed and eventually becoming receptive to the experiences of happiness and joy. Although the folk psychology of the Shipibo medics and the insights of modern psychology and psychotherapy use radically different language and rely on different conceptual universes, it is our view that, by engaging both discourses in dialogue, they point toward the same core insight: Processing grief requires the capacity to feel; to allow the full impact of the sorrow, the sadness, and the loss to wash over us; and to be present to it and stay open to what is. Both CBT and the icaro-led ayahuasca session serve similar functions, as they help create a dedicated space where the grieving person feels safe to feel.

Conclusion

Our initial body of provisional theory-grounded data is constituted by the reports of 50 participants who attended workshops at the Temple of the Way of Light while processing grief over the death of a loved one. In order to organize and analyze the

data, we identified a number of useful psychotherapeutic approaches, concepts, and theories in the literature on grief and juxtaposed them with the experiences of our participants. Our aim was to engage in an interdisciplinary and inter-epistemological dialogue that would further our understanding of the unique therapeutic potential that ayahuasca brings to the grieving process. In order to discover more facets and nuances of the extremely rich and complex phenomena observed in the field and evidenced in the reports of our participants, we combined available evidence and theory from the fields of psychology, psychiatry, and medical anthropology while also including the perspectives and knowledge of the four Shipibo healers. We believe all of these fields contribute to our understanding of the complex and unique dynamics of the ritual use of ayahuasca and its applications in the grieving process, within a syncretic context where Western practices and Amazonian medical systems meet.

Emerging from this exercise are partially novel and sometimes unexplored and uncharted concepts and approaches that await further scientific inquiry. Our data appeals to the need to further the development of a sound body of theory from which to build a model for the application of ayahuasca-based practices in the process of grief. However, we must recognize the limitations of our study; this is a work in progress, and we are far from a complete understanding of the complex interactions between the personal, the cultural, and the beyond-the-human (Kohn 2013) aspects that shape and contribute to the experience of the participants. Our work does offer some answers, or at least descriptions, as to *what* could be happening during an ayahuasca experience for people who are grieving. However, a lot remains unexplained in relation to *how* and *why* these processes are happening, in what personal and social context they are more likely to arise, and what aspects of the setting are more conducive to their emergence.

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