

FROM MEDICINE MEN TO DAY TRIPPERS: SHAMANIC  
TOURISM IN IQUITOS, PERU

by

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FROM MEDICINE MEN TO DAY TRIPPERS: SHAMANIC TOURISM IN  
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Under the supervision of Professor Frank Salomon

At the University of Wisconsin-Madison

This dissertation, examines the cultural construction of ayahuasca (an Amazonian hallucinogen) and shamanism, their manifestations in the western imagination and experience, and their localized experience in the city of Iquitos, Peru, in the context of the phenomenon of *shamanic tourism*. Shamanic tourism has flourished in the last few years and is promoted internationally by several agents both local and western. I embarked on this research in order to answer two questions: first, what are the motives of westerners who participate in ayahuasca ceremonies, and second, how do they conceptualize and integrate their experiences in their existing worldview. Iquitos, Peru was chosen as a research site because as a gateway to the eco- and shamanic tourism serves as a location where different cultural constructions of ayahuasca co-exist, namely the urban mestizo and western, it can offer a better perspective on the appropriation of ayahuasca by westerners.

I place the phenomenon of shamanic tourism within the historical context of the relationship of the West with the exotic and spiritual “other”, a history that has gone hand in hand with colonialism and exploitative relationships. I argue that shamanic tourism is not an anomaly but is consistent with the nature of shamanism,

which has historically been about intercultural exchange, as shamanic knowledge and experience has been sought cross-culturally. In addition, in the West, esoteric knowledge has often been sought in faraway places, thus this intercultural exchange is also consistent with Western tradition. Through my data I show that the western interest in ayahuasca is much more than a pretext for drug use but rather is often perceived as a pilgrimage and should be looked at in the context of a new paradigm, or rather a shift in the discourse about plant hallucinogens, a discourse that tackles them as sacraments, in sharp contrast to chemical drugs. Ritual in this context is instrumental but not as something that reproduces social structure; rather it fosters self transformation while at the same time challenging the participants' very cultural constructs and basic assumptions about the world.

To my parents and to Daniel, my family

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## Table of Contents

Introduction.....	1
Subject presentation.....	1
Context and rationale.....	5
Ayahuasca.....	7
The Ayahuasca experience.....	15
Description of the field site – Iquitos.....	20
History.....	30
Theoretical considerations.....	46
Description of research project and methodology.....	60
PART I: The Western Vision Quest.....	76
Chapter 1: Shamanism and the Western imagination.....	78
Generic Shamanism.....	79
Irrational and vilified Shamanism.....	83
Medicalized Shamanism.....	86
Idealized Shamanism.....	89
Neoshamanism and the New Age.....	93
Chapter 2: Hallucinogens and the Western tradition.....	98
Discussion of hallucinogens in the Western tradition.....	99
Scientific Approaches.....	100
The legacy of the 1960s.....	105
The entheogenic paradigm.....	106
Ayahuasca in the West.....	108
Scientific studies on ayahuasca.....	113
Chapter 3: Shamanic tourism.....	119
Motives of shamanic tourists.....	126
The archaic mystique.....	127
Accessing the sacred.....	130
Healing.....	131
Personal transformation.....	132
Authenticity and interculturality.....	134
The feminization of ayahuasca.....	142
PART II: The Dual Nature of Amazonian Shamanism: Healing and Sorcery.....	150
Chapter 4: Ambivalence as an element of Amazonian Shamanism.....	153
Chapter 5: Healing.....	169
Elements of Healing in an Ayahuasca Ceremony.....	176
The element of Crisis.....	198
Risks.....	206
Chapter 6: Sorcery.....	216
The sorcerers' attacks.....	223
PART III: Ritual and Self.....	238
Chapter 7: Reconfiguring the Self.....	238

From apprentice to shaman.....	241
Shamanic dietas as a tool for transformation and knowledge acquisition .....	251
Theories of the self.....	255
The self in philosophy.....	256
The self in psychology.....	259
The self and the New Age.....	262
The Ritual.....	263
Ayahuasca preparation.....	266
Ceremonies .....	268
Discussion.....	289
Conclusions.....	302
APPENDIX 1: Maps and Photographs.....	311
APPENDIX 2: Questionnaire .....	333
APPENDIX 3: Glossary of common terms .....	334
APPENDIX 4: List of plants.....	337
APPENDIX 5: Designation as Cultural Patrimony of the Nation Extended to the Knowledge and Traditional Uses of Ayahuasca as Practiced by Native Amazon Communities.....	339
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	342

## Introduction

### Subject presentation

This dissertation deals with contemporary Ayahuasca use in the context of shamanic tourism in the Peruvian jungle city of Iquitos. I focus on the ways Western tourists conceptualize their shamanic experiences and how they integrate them in their lives. Secondly, but not less importantly I look at the interactions between westerners and locals as they are shaped in the Iquitos milieu. I use ethnographic, psychological, philosophical as well as historical approaches to achieve this. My study will contribute to the broader discussions about drugs, spirituality and globalization. This dissertation is timelier than ever, since it will provide an inside perspective on a phenomenon on which recent studies (Dobkin de Rios 2006, Dobkin de Rios and Rumrill 2008) have painted a very dire picture.

The central anthropological issue I wanted to explore was how ayahuasca shamanism is constructed in different settings and contexts. More specifically, the question I set out to answer was “Why do westerners pursue shamanic experiences and how are these experiences constructed in the context of shamanic tourism?” I argue that I do not see shamanic tourism as an anomaly but as consistent with the nature of shamanic knowledge, which has always been exchanged across and between cultures. Traditionally, in South American shamanism power and symbolism has been sought outside a particular cultural milieu. Moreover, in the West, esoteric knowledge has often been sought in faraway places (Helms 1988),

thus this intercultural exchange is also consistent with Western tradition. I do not see tourism as an external force that imposes meaning on local shamanism; rather I will show that there is a two-way exchange and westerners adopt shamanic discourse as well, especially one that involves relationships with non-human persons. In addition, I argue that this phenomenon should be looked at in the context of a new paradigm, or rather a shift in the discourse about plant hallucinogens, a discourse that tackles them as sacraments, in sharp contrast to chemical drugs. Ritual in this context is instrumental but not as something that maintains social structure; rather it fosters self transformation while at the same time challenging the participants' very cultural constructs and basic assumptions about the world.

I place the phenomenon of ayahuasca tourism within the historical context of the relationship of the West with the exotic and spiritual "other", a history that has gone hand in hand with colonialism and exploitative relationships. Through my data I show that the Western interest in ayahuasca is much more than a pretext for drug use but rather has a spiritual component and seeks to address an urgent need for self-transformation. In the Iquitos milieu, shamanism is reinvented as local shamanic practices converge with Western ideas of spirituality and healing and create a hybrid and highly dynamic practice, which I call *shamanic tourism*. The title of the dissertation is meant to reflect the continuum between traditional curanderos or medicine men with a life-long commitment to their practice and the casual participants in ayahuasca ceremonies which have been called "day trippers" in a popular publication (Elton 1999). I argue that ayahuasca is viewed by westerners as

the healing force for bodily and mental disorders that stem from what is perceived as Western culture's spiritual impoverishment. For participants in ayahuasca ceremonies, this healing is also part of a larger project for healing and transforming humanity. On the other hand I will show that shamanic tourism can also be highly problematic, and have unsettling effects on local society and includes risks for the tourists themselves.

Shamanic tourism is a new and controversial subject in anthropology. Admittedly, before I started this research I was wary of the motives of westerners and did not think the milieu of shamanic tourism deserved to be the focus of an entire dissertation. My fieldwork proposal was an ambitious multi-sited ethnography, a project that was soon abandoned once I discovered the complexity of the Iquitos locale. While writing the results of my research I became more and more aware that this was a study in contradiction, ambiguity and the liminal or transitional space between "worlds", whether it be the Western and Amazonian worlds or conventional reality and the realm of spirits. The main theme of this dissertation is that of transformation and it is a common theme between tourism, pilgrimage and psychedelic experience. I will show that when boundaries are crossed—geographical, cultural and even between realities—this crossing often stimulates self-discovery and self-reflection for the subject.

Several scholars criticize drug tourism and the introduction of therapeutic milieus to Amazonia, particularly ventures that might involve outsiders interacting with unenculturated indigenous groups. Some of these critiques themselves suffer

from naive notions of authenticity. Jonathan Ott believes “ayahuasca tourism can only disrupt the evanescent remnant of preliterate religiosity struggling to make a place for itself in the modern world, while attracting the wrong kind of attention to ayahuasca” (1994:12). With the commercialization of ayahuasca, some proponents of “traditionally” constructed use argue that ayahuasca is in danger of being profaned (Dobkin de Rios 2006). As many South Americans realize its money-making potential, they “come to adopt a New Age vocabulary of shamanic healer/spiritual voyager” (Dobkin de Rios 1994:18). Some warn of the impact this “industry” might have on the environment. According to Grunwell (1998) “not only are the people of South America placing demands on the supply of ayahuasca, but also with the influx of tourists, sources could be in danger of complete exhaustion”. Finally, as Proctor (2001) notes this commercialization can have negative effects on health care in Amazonian communities as a lot of shamans are mostly interested in tourism than healing members of the community. She also warns that shamans adapt to the expectations of the tourists, a fact that greatly distorts indigenous shamanism.

I do not approach tourism as an exogenous force to local society, as early anthropological studies have done, and my study is not of the one-way impact of tourism (whether negative or positive). Rather, this is a study on interculturality. South American shamanism has always been about intercultural exchange and has drawn symbols and power from a variety of sources. More than sharing sociocultural content, ayahuasca shamanism provides an intercultural space for westerners and locals to dialogue. Just as shamans cross boundaries between worlds, tourists cross

cultural and geographical boundaries with a variety of motivations and often find common humanity beyond the particularity of their lives. This dissertation is about the journey that the tourists take both literally and metaphorically. This is a journey to the remote jungle of Peru but also a journey to the unknown and ambivalent world of shamanism. And just like shamanism, tourist activities are often ambiguous themselves, as they can have at the same time positive as well as negative effects on local society.

### **Context and rationale**

Medical and legal discourse in Western culture has approached psychedelics with condemnatory attitudes and negative presumptions, while on the other hand some alternative spirituality groups see them as the solution to all “evils” of Western culture. It is this ambiguous relationship with the “other” that is the common thread throughout this dissertation. Taussig points out the conflicting Western reactions to shamans, which he sums up as an “alternating, composite, colonially created image of the wild man, bestial and superhuman, devil and god” (1987:444). During the first few centuries of contact with shamanic traditions, on the one hand we have reports that underline this aspect of “irrationality” of shamanism and on the other we have reports obviously influenced by the Christian paradigm, which tend to demonize it (Narby and Huxley 2001). Both discourses were hegemonic and assumed the inferiority of the “other” while it was habitually assumed that science and indigenous paradigms were incompatible worldviews. The first reports of travelers and

missionaries on shamanism were sensationalistic and contributed to a view of the shamanistic phenomena as representative of the irrationality of the non-Western “other”. Western perspectives also emphasized what was considered to be the deceitful nature of shamans’ actions. A lot has changed in Western attitudes since then and this rocky history is explored in the second chapter of this dissertation.

Psychedelics of plant origin have found no settled place in “Western cultures” (here taken to mean the Mediterranean and north Atlantic cultures and their colonial-to-postcolonial derivatives). “Exotic” psychotropics were approached with awe, with premature scientism, then with vilifying rhetoric and criminalization. However, as certain ones were also appropriated by sectors of Western societies, their use has changed from exploratory, to recreational, to sacramental, with other major fluctuations now in process. Over a century after the initial ethnographic reports, we are left with conflicting and still largely ideological reactions to psychedelics. Ethnographically, this very variation can help us interpret societies’ ways of tackling extraordinary experience, particularly its presumed relation to knowledge and its standing as an access to the radically “other”. Of these plants, few have excited Western imagination as much as *Banisteriopsis caapi* Spruce ex Griseb, commonly known as *ayahuasca*, the focus of this study.

It may be that the innermost content of ayahuasca experience lies beyond the respectful edge of ethnographic translation. But the fact that divergent translations and commentaries on it abound within several cultures, and move among them in “contact zones” of all kinds, provides “natural” access to the ways in which differing



societies seek, organize, and construe experiences through the altered sensorium. Even without any claim of deep phenomenology, it is possible to characterize the ideas of knowledge that ayahuasca complexes express, to trace their rootedness in historical and social realities, and to interpret the effects of coexistence among different sources and interpretations of extraordinary experience. Because the “contact zones” where South American ayahuasca use engages Western discourses are also active rain forest frontiers of globalization, the field ethnography of these issues provides a window on a dramatic field of interaction between discourses of power and authority.

### **Ayahuasca**

Archaeological evidence of a drinking vessel of the Pastaza culture from Ecuador hints that ayahuasca use was well established in pre-Columbian times and that its use might date back to at least 2000 B.C. (Naranjo 1983, 1986). Today it is an important part of indigenous ethnomedicine and shamanism, it is being used by several syncretic religions originating in Brazil (Labate 2001, Labate et al. 2008), and have now expanded to the Western world.

Ayahuasca is consumed in the form of a brew, which is prepared from the stems of *Banisteriopsis caapi* or *B. inebrians* combined with other plants in order to induce a hallucinogenic experience. The most common of these plants is *Psychotria viridis* or chacruna (Schultes and Hofmann 1992). A number of other admixture plants discussed in the literature (Schultes and Hofmann 1992, McKenna et al. 1995)

as well as in chapter 7 are also often added to the brew. The active hallucinogenic substance in the ayahuasca brew is N,N-Dimethyltryptamine (DMT), which is actually present in a number of plants—such as *Psychotria viridis* and the widely distributed *Peganum harmala* (Syrian rue)—as well as the human brain (Strassman 2001). DMT by itself is not orally active, due to inactivation by peripheral Monoamine Oxidase (MAO) in the human gut and liver (Shulgin 1976, McKenna 1984). Therefore, to render DMT orally active it needs to be administered with an MAO inhibitor; *B. caapi* contains harmine and other  $\beta$ -carboline alkaloids, which are potent MAO inhibitors (Rivier and Lindgren 1972, McKenna 1984, Callaway et al. 1994: 295, Callaway et al. 1999).

The term Ayahuasca is Quechua, the language of the Inca Empire, today spoken in Peru, Bolivia, Ecuador, Chile, and Argentina. Naranjo (1983) speculates that the term spread through pre-Colombian contact between Andean and Amazonian populations. The fact that the most widely used name for the plant brew happens to be Quechua might indicate knowledge of the plant by the Incas (Naranjo 1983). Evidence of the wide use of the term can be traced back to the 18<sup>th</sup> century (Naranjo 1983). According to the bulk of the literature ayahuasca means “vine of the dead” or “vine of the soul” and it refers to the freeing of the spirit from the body that it induces, as well as contact with the spirit world (Schultes and Hofman 1992) and dead ancestors (Naranjo 1983). In Quechua the first half of the word *aya* means dead person as well as spirit or soul (Whitten 1976), while the word *huasca* means vine (Naranjo 1983). Whitten (1976:61) discusses that in Jungle Quichua there is no

correlation of the word with the dead and he prefers the English translation “soul vine”. However, some scholars argue that the actual Quechua meaning comes from the words *jayac huasca*, which means “bitter vine” (Oberem 1958, Frank Salomon, 2002, personal communication). However, the translation “vine of the soul” prevails, a fact that might have to do with a strong tendency to sensationalize and romanticize. Ayahuasca has varied names among the indigenous peoples of Amazonia, including *caapi*, *dapa*, *mihi*, *kahi*, *natema*, *pinde*, *yagé*, *nishí*, *nape*, *camorampi*, *mii*, *pitujiracu*, and *tucondi* (Naranjo 1983, Schultes and Hofman 1992).

The *Banisteriopsis caapi* vine (figure 1) is indigenous to the Western and Northwestern Amazon. It is not certain where exactly it originated but today it is cultivated throughout the Amazon basin (Rätsch 2005). Its use has also spread westward across the Andes to several localities along the Pacific coast. It belongs to the Malpighiaceae botanical family, in which ninety-two species are recognized, most of them found in tropical Central and South America (Rätsch 2005, Naranjo 1983). It is cultivated through cuttings as most cultivated plants are infertile (they do not produce flowers or seeds) (Rätsch 2005). The principal alkaloids found in *B. caapi* are harmine, harmaline and tetrahydroharmine (Rätsch 2005).

The second most important plant included in the ayahuasca brew is *Psychotria viridis* (figure 2), a bush belonging in the Rubiaceae family. It is unknown when it was first used but its use was first recorded in the 1960s by the ethnobotanist Homer Pinkley (Rätsch 2005). Its distribution is similar to that of *B. caapi* and it is cultivated in a similar manner, from cuttings. The principal alkaloid of

*P. viridis* responsible for the visions in the ayahuasca experience is N,N-DMT along with small amounts of MMT and MTHC (Rätsch 2005:457).

Plants containing the principal alkaloids found in *B. caapi* and *P. viridis*, DMT and  $\beta$ -carbolines, can be found all over the world and many people have experimented with these plants to produce results similar to the ayahuasca brew. These preparations are known as ayahuasca analogues (Rätsch 2005, Ott 1994).

For decades, ayahuasca was the stuff of legend associated with various scientists and literary writers, from the pioneer field ethnobotanist Richard Evans Schultes to the poet Allen Ginsberg and writer William Burroughs. Today its use has expanded to a global level and has had an enormous impact on religious and neo-shamanic currents in the West. It has also attracted the attention of scientists internationally, who conduct research with ayahuasca in order to determine possible uses of it in the West. Ethnobotanist Ott offers a good example of emerging attitudes toward ayahuasca today when he writes that “the use of ayahuasca potions, more so than any other entheogenic drug we know, has survived the onslaught of literacy and acculturation, to make a place for itself in the New Order” (1993:242).

Ayahuasca use among indigenous Amazonian groups has been recorded by several ethnographers, including but not limited to: Karsten (1964) discusses the Yumbo, Canelo and Jívaro, Carneiro (1964, 1970) the Amahuaca, Kensinger (1973, 1995) the Cashinahua, Siskind (1973) the Sharanahua, Weiss (1973) the Arawakan speaking groups, Brown (1986) the Aguaruna, Chaumeil (1999) the Yagua, Reichel-Dolmatoff (1971, 1972, 1976, 1981) the Tukano, Whitten (1976, 1985) the Canelos

Quichua, Baer (1969, 1987, 1992) the Campa, the Piro as well as the Matsigenka (Baer and Snell 1974). Shipibo ayahuasca use has been discussed by Illius (1987), Tessmann (1928), Roe (1982), Karsten (1964) and Eakin et al. (1980). Ayahuasca use among the Shuar (Jívaro) has been discussed by Descola (1996), Harner (1972) and more recently Perruchon (2003). These are just a fraction of the indigenous groups populating the Amazon basin, the majority of which do not use ayahuasca. Several groups such as the Piaroa use a variety of snuffs; however they also use *B. caapi* but in a very different way than the one described in this study—without the addition of *P. viridis*. More studies of *B. caapi* use in snuff-using societies is needed (Rodd 2008).

In the traditional–indigenous setting—ayahuasca is very important in maintaining social order and in interpreting daily life events. Shamans, being mediators between the spirit and the “real” world, need it in order to move freely between the two and negotiate and restore relations between them. Shamans also contact the “master spirits of the animals in order that the hunters may find game and influence the spirits of the seasons so that harvests will be abundant” (Langdon 1979a:64). Ayahuasca is so fundamental for some groups like the Shuar (Jívaro) of the Ecuadorian Amazon that Michael Harner (1973a) points out that the ayahuasca induced experience, is seen as the true reality whereas normal waking life is considered simply an illusion. For the Shuar the true forces behind daily life are in the supernatural realm and can only be accessed through the psychedelic experience. In addition, in many tribal cultures ayahuasca along with other mind altering plants,

is viewed as an intelligent being possessing a spirit (ayahuasca mama) and being able to communicate and transmit knowledge to humans through the visionary state (Whitten 1976).

Some of the most known ethnographies that highlight indigenous ayahuasca use are those of Reichel-Dolmatoff who did research among the Tukano. Reichel-Dolmatoff has looked at the mythological, symbolic as well as the ritual context of ayahuasca and his books are still a wonderful resource for any student of Amazonian Shamanism. He found that in myths ayahuasca is identified with a human being and this identification is the basis of the criteria by which certain parts of the vine are selected over others in the preparation of the drink (1972). He also explored the remarkable role that ayahuasca plays in native ethnoastronomy. In the Southern Hemisphere the Milky Way is quite visible, and plays a central role in indigenous shamanism. It has been described as an alternate route for shamans seeking to climb the sky and to reach the celestial spirits. Indigenous groups such as the Shuar use ayahuasca in order to climb the Milky Way. Schultes and Raffauf (1992) describe similar uses of ayahuasca among Andean groups where shamans, after climbing the Milky Way, communicate with the ancestors and request information about heavenly beings as well as antidotes for sorcery they have not otherwise been able to counteract. These are just examples of the ethnoastronomical understanding of the ayahuasca experience.

Ayahuasca use among the mestizo population of Peru has been also studied, two of the most known ethnographies on this being Marlene Dobkin de Rios' as well

as Luis Eduardo Luna's ethnographies, both of whom did research in Iquitos. Dobkin de Rios (1972), describes ayahuasca being used by mestizos<sup>1</sup> throughout the Iquitos area for reasons similar as described above: in rituals seeking guidance and protection from plant spirits, to diagnose and treat disease, for divination, for sorcery (to cause harm or prevent harm caused by others) and for pleasure. She also parallels the role of the curandero with that of the psychotherapist in Western cultures.

Mestizo shamanism involving ayahuasca as it is practiced in urban centers like Iquitos, is known as *vegetalismo* and its practitioners as *vegetalistas*, specialists in plant medicine (Luna 1986). Luna introduced the concept of the "plants as teachers", explaining that plant spirits teach the *vegetalistas* directly how to diagnose and cure illnesses (Luna 1984). This is different from an herbalist who knows how to utilize a variety of plants but does not necessarily communicate with them. This approach of plants as living sentient beings and the communication of the curandero with their spirits, as well as other non-human persons, for a successful healing was central in my observations in the field.

There are admittedly links between jungle and urban shamanism and, as Chaumeil (1999) argues, the two types of shamanism even though they draw from diverse shamanic traditions they tend throughout time to become increasingly uniform. Gow (1992) even goes further to argue that ayahuasca shamanism has developed in urban areas in the last three hundred years and has been introduced to isolated tribal people. As he stresses, the above is more of a hypothesis and needs to

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<sup>1</sup> Mestizo means of mixed blood.

be further researched. However, we could argue that historical periods such as the rubber boom era that brought indigenous populations in contact with outside forces provided fertile ground for this increasing uniformity of ayahuasca shamanism and the exchange of ethnomedical knowledge between populations. What is certain is that the jungle urban centers such as Iquitos and Pucallpa become the points of contact between the jungle and the external world and are the point where knowledge gets exchanged and a new form of shamanism emerged. They are also the stage for this dissertation described in the following pages.

A relatively recent development (in the 20<sup>th</sup> century) is the creation of a number of syncretic churches originating in the Brazilian Amazon, which are using ayahuasca in their rituals. These churches combine Christian elements with Amazonian imagery and mythology. The largest of these churches are Santo Daime (Macrae 2000) and União do Vegetal (Henman et al. 1986), which have now chapters in Europe as well as in North America. Santo Daime was founded by Raimundo Irineu Sera who “received visions of the Virgin Mary in the form of the Queen of the Forest, who revealed to him a religious doctrine which he was to bring to the world through the specific rituals that he was shown” (Beynon 1992). A central element of these religions is a reverence for nature personified as the Virgin Mary (Beynon 1992). In Brazil they have regular meetings and men, women and children are all allowed to partake (Rätsch 2005:712). The discussion of these churches in depth would be too great an undertaking for this study but a recent publication provides a wonderful discussion of this phenomenon for interested



readers (Labate and Macrae 2010). These churches are legally permitted to use the ayahuasca brew in Brazil, after their practices were deemed legal by CONFEN (the Federal Drug Council) in 1992 (Beynon 1992). A recent Supreme Court decision has allowed them to do so in the United States as well (Leaming 2006).

### **The Ayahuasca experience**

Our knowledge of how ayahuasca affects the brain is limited by two factors; first, our knowledge of how the human brain performs simple functions is still relatively limited, and second, researchers who wish to conduct research with hallucinogens face a variety of regulatory challenges (McKenna 2004). For an overview of scientific studies of ayahuasca see chapter two.

However, even if we had a better understanding of these processes it would still not explain the meaning different cultures assign to the experience. A quick review of first-person accounts soon reveals a theme of ambivalence toward the experience. Characteristically, Michael Taussig writes, “taking yagé is awful: the shaking, the vomiting, the nausea, the shitting, the tension. Yet it is a wondrous thing, awful and unstoppable” (Taussig 1987:406). Usually unpleasant physical effects are followed or accompanied by overwhelming visions. Beyer (2009:23-4) lists three phases in the ayahuasca experience: the first phase is dominated by geometric figures, the second by contact with the spirit world and the third is quieter with physical symptoms lessening and more pleasant visions.

The effects of DMT, which provides the hallucinogenic effect in ayahuasca,

as described by Strassman (2001) are: sense of timelessness, loss of control, contact with other “beings” or “entities”, feeling that another intelligence directs their minds, visions of unseen worlds, of DNA-like spirals, of jungle animals etc. Like other psychedelics, it can induce states similar to mystical experiences. In addition to the visionary experience, ayahuasca causes sensitivity to light as well as violent vomiting and diarrhea, which are considered to cleanse the body. Many people report the perception of parallel realities or universes during an ayahuasca experience.

Common visions mentioned in interviews were: geometrical shapes, one’s own death, and contact with non-human persons. People also reported that visions change very quickly and often it is very difficult to understand what one is looking at and even more difficult to remember all of it afterwards. Change between light and darkness is often reported as well. One of the things that a shaman is able to do and everyone learns by experience is to control the visions—or to be more precise to catch up with them and make sense of them. Here is how Stafford and Bigwood summarize the ayahuasca experience:

Ayahuasqueros describe long sequences of dream-like imagery; geometrical patterns; manifestations of spirit helpers, demons and deities, tigers, birds and reptiles. They see dark-skinned men and women. They experience sensations of flying and of their own death; they see events at a great distance. Many users claim that these visions appear in a spiritually significant progression. [Stafford and Bigwood 1992:349]

According to indigenous folklore, the ayahuasca experience is vital in providing knowledge and an understanding of the mythological origins of life.

Reichel-Dolmatoff (1972:102) wrote that to drink ayahuasca, is “to return to the

uterus, to the *fons et origo* of all things, where the individual ‘sees’ the tribal divinities, the creation of the universe and humanity, the first human couple, the creation of the animals, and the establishment of the social order”. Most ethnographies contain a wealth of information on the indigenous cosmologies related to the plant as well as the visions that are considered to be specific to its use. Schultes (1976) reports that under the influence of ayahuasca the indigenous people “see” the origin of all things: the tribal gods, the creation of the universe of man and the animals. Many indigenous people also claim to acquire their extensive botanical knowledge by ingesting ayahuasca (Narby 1995).

According to ethnographers the most common themes in ayahuasca visions are: (1) the feeling of separation of the soul from the body, and the sensation of flight, (2) visions of jaguars, snakes and other predatory animals, (3) a sense of contact with supernatural agents (demons and divinities), (4) visions of distant persons, cities and landscapes (perceived as clairvoyance) and (5) detailed reenactments of previous events (Harner 1973b:172).

Visions are often depicted in indigenous art. The Tukano, whose art was studied by Reichel-Dolmatoff, use abstract paintings on house fronts, rattles and bark loincloths; when asked they claimed that these designs were observed during ayahuasca inebriation. During 1966-1967 Reichel-Dolmatoff offered a number of adult males who frequently ingested ayahuasca sheets of paper and a choice of twelve colored pencils. The colors they spontaneously selected “were exclusively red, yellow, and blue, on very few occasions adding a shade of hazel brown”

(Reichel-Dolmatoff 1972:106). In addition, certain design elements were regularly repeated. Here is Reichel-Dolmatoff's listing of the top twenty: Male organ, Female organ, Fertilized uterus, Uterus as passage, Drops of semen, Anaconda-canoe, Phratry, Group of phratries, Line of descent, Incest, Exogamy, Box of ornaments, Milky Way, Rainbow, Sun, Vegetal growth, Thought, Stool, Rattles, Cigar holder (Reichel-Dolmatoff 1972:104-113).

Among the Shipibo, the designs are an integral part of their material and spiritual culture (Gebhart Sayer 1985). They are to be found on their ceramics as well as their clothes. These artifacts are sold everywhere in Iquitos by Shipibo women. According to their mythology the designs were either given to them by the cosmic snake (that surrounds the world) or by other spirits. Consultants report that under the influence of Ayahuasca the designs cover their entire visual field and lie on top of all objects.

The cross cultural occurrence of animal imagery and even communication with plant and animal spirits has been investigated by researchers such as psychiatrist Naranjo (1973:176), who posed the question whether Ayahuasca visions are dependent on the cultural context or of a psychic universal nature. His results were not clear. His test subjects were 35 volunteers from Santiago (Chile)—people from an urban environment, without shamanic experience with little experience with mescaline or LSD. Naranjo used various doses of the ayahuasca alkaloid harmaline. One woman saw a light round object that she perceived as her soul, which left her body and moved individually from it. Other visions among the participants were

snakes, crocodiles, reptiles in general, tigers, leopards and other felines. The results were interesting because these felines are not to be found in Chile. In some cases dark skinned people were seen that are also not found in Chile. Another common theme was masks with sardonic-diabolic forms (Naranjo 1973:190). Predator animals were often reported with mixed reactions to them. Some perceived them as threatening and some as friendly companions.

Another often mentioned element of the ayahuasca experience in the literature is the ability to “see” faraway places. Writing of ayahuasca practices observed among the Cashinahua of Peru, the anthropologist Kenneth Kensinger reported that “consultants have described hallucinations about places far removed, both geographically and from their own experience” (1973:12). Several, “who have never been to or seen pictures of Pucallpa, the large town at the Ucayali River terminus of the Central Highway, have described their visits under the influence of ayahuasca to the town with sufficient detail for me to be able to recognize specific shops and sights” (1973:12). In a more compelling anecdote, Kensinger adds: “On the day following one Ayahuasca party six of nine men informed me of seeing the death of my chai, ‘my mother’s father’. This occurred two days before I was informed by radio of his death” (Kensinger 1973:12). There are numerous accounts on the supposed “telepathic” properties of ayahuasca in the literature, despite the skepticism of many investigators. This is also reflected in the name given to the first alkaloid isolated from the *B. caapi* vine (“telepathine”). Schultes and Hofmann (1992) dismiss these claims as “unfounded”.

## **Description of the field site – Iquitos**

The first thing that is immediately noticeable upon disembarking the airplane at the Iquitos airport is the wave of heat and humidity. It feels a lot like floating in hot liquid and takes a while to get used to. The climate is tropical, hot, humid and rainy with an average temperature of 20°C and an average relative humidity of 84 percent (Lane 2001). The wet season lasts from around December to March with the river reaching its highest point in May and its lowest point in October. Due to climate changes in the recent years though, rainfall was much less than usual during the time that I spent there. As a result the level of the rivers dropped, making travel and transportation of goods difficult and sometimes dangerous.

Iquitos (population around 331,548 in 2000) is located in the Northern jungle of Peru at 104 meters (350 ft.) above sea level and 3,084 km from the Atlantic Ocean (Lane 2001). For a long time a major port in the Amazon Basin, Iquitos is surrounded by three rivers: the Nanay, the Itaya, and the Amazon. The city used to be on the Amazon River but now is on the Itaya River due to a change in the course of the river. It is the largest city in the Peruvian jungle, despite the fact that there are no roads joining it to the coast or the Andes and that it can only be reached by air or river.

Iquitos is important in the shipment of lumber from the Amazon Rain forest to the outside world, and is the gateway to much of the oil exploration in Amazonia (Lane 2001). Other industries include oil and rum production and more recently the

export of Camu camu (*Myrciaria dubia*). Some of these industries are responsible for the high ecological and cultural erosion in the surrounding area an important fact when one thinks of the expectations of the tourists for a pristine jungle or authentic “cultural” experiences. Despite the large size of the city and the existence of a major port, industrial production and agriculture are close to non-existent in the area (Penn 2010). Iquitos, however, offers many modern conveniences to the residents and tourists in the area—including a multiplex cinema and a golf course for the large expatriate population residing there.

Iquitos has two universities: *Universidad Nacional de la Amazonía Peruana*, the local state university, and *Universidad Particular de Iquitos*, a private institution. It is also home to the *Instituto de Investigaciones de la Amazonía Peruana* (IIAP). Of interest are the *Museo Etnográfico* and *Biblioteca Amazónica*, which are a great resource on the history of the Amazon. The Museum has a display of Amazon fauna as well as crafts from indigenous groups, a painting collection and 80 sculptures, displaying the daily life of different lowland ethnic groups. The library is considered one of the most important on the Amazon region in Latin America (Enjoy Peru S.A. 2004:70). Another important institution and one of interest to ethnobotanists is the *Herbarium Amazonense*, founded in 1972 (Ayala Flores 1999) and holding a large collection of plant samples and the source of useful publications on the flora of the Peruvian Amazon.

Iquitos is often referred to by locals as an “island” because it is the largest city in the world that cannot be reached by road; there is only one road,

approximately 90 km, which connects Iquitos to Nauta, a small town to the south. Most travel within the city itself is done by bus, motorcycle or *motocarro* (auto rickshaw). Transportation to nearby towns is done via small public boats called *colectivos*. Cars are expensive to transport and few can afford to bring one to Iquitos. With the streets dominated by loud motocarros the noise for the bigger part of the day is blaring and is hard to get used to. There is launch service to the border with Colombia and Brazil and to the south to the Ucayali River, as well as air service to Lima and Colombia. Locals like to reminisce about the time that there were direct flights from and to the United States (Miami), something that was very beneficial for tourism. These flights were cancelled in the 1990s but for as long as I was there hopeful rumors of the reinstatement of these flights abounded.

With the rubber boom in the beginning of the 20th century the city gained prominence and wealth, but it declined after the collapse of the market with the production of rubber in Asia. One can find visible traces of Iquitos' history on its buildings, starting with 80 mansions dating to the rubber boom era usually marked with a plaque reading "Patrimonio de la Nación" (Lane 2001). One of its famous buildings is the Iron House or "Casa de Fierro", a two story house built completely of iron by the French architect, Gustave Eiffel (who built the Eiffel Tower in Paris); it is one of the first "pre-fabricated" houses to be brought to Peru. It reached Iquitos in 1890 after its purchase by Julius H. Toots, a rubber tycoon, who subsequently divided it in two halves and sold one to Baca Diaz and the other to Fermin Fitzcarrald (Lane 2001:27). The second half was eventually dismantled, while the



first one stands on the southern corner of Plaza de Armas until today. It was first a mansion, after the rubber boom a restaurant, and has subsequently housed shops, the Club Social de Iquitos until 1985 and most recently a restaurant (Lane 2001). Many other buildings from that era like the former Palace Hotel of Moorish design that was built between 1908 and 1912, are examples of the extravagance and splendor introduced to the area during the rubber boom. During that era there was a railway in Iquitos, which functioned until 1939 (Lane 2001).

At the border of the city, on the Malecón (promenade) Tarapacá (Photos 1 and 2), referred to as the Boulevard, one can view the river Itaya. The houses along the boulevard are decorated with tiles brought over from Europe during the rubber boom. The Boulevard is home to many bars and restaurants and is full of life in the evenings. It has been nicely outfitted by the municipality and it is the place where families or couples have strolls, where artisans sell their crafts and where everyone can see everyone else. On Sundays or holidays one can catch a variety of street performances as well. A few blocks to the south begins “the poor Belén Quarter (Barrio de Belén), also known as the ‘Peruvian Venice’ because the houses stand on wooden poles above the waters of the Amazon River. This poor area can only be visited by canoe and is unique to the jungle” (Enjoy Peru S.A. 2004:70).

In the same area is the huge and colorful market of Belén. Jungle products can be found there such as fish, fruit, as well as meat from jungle animals. One can find other foodstuffs that are imported to Iquitos as well as commercial goods. The most interesting part of the market for tourists interested in traditional medicine is

the *Pasaje Paquito*, the part with the stalls of medicinal plants and remedies as well as jungle crafts. There one can find numerous plants for purchase as well as prepared medicines for many ailments as well items for spells, to attract love or wealth, for protection etc. This is where ayahuasca is sold, both the prepared brew and the plants if one wants to make it themselves. Locals generally do not trust the prepared ayahuasca brew from the market.

Iquitos is the capital of the department of Loreto and the province of Maynas. Loreto (Area or Surface: 368,852 km<sup>2</sup> – population in 2007: 891,732<sup>2</sup>) is the largest department of Peru, but it is among the least populated. Almost half of its population lives under conditions of extreme poverty, as Loreto is the department of Peru with the highest poverty rate (O'Hare and Barret 1999). Loreto was founded in 1866 (Robinson 1964:63). Its large surface is covered with thick vegetation and has wide river flood beds. They are covered with rainwater and usually are swamped in the summer. In these flood areas there are elevated sectors called “restingas”, which always stand out on the Amazonian plain, even in times of the greatest swellings. There are numerous lagoons known as “cochas” and “tipishcas”, surrounded by marshy areas with abundant grass vegetation (Living in Peru n.d.:20). Numerous rivers cross Loreto's territory. All of these are a part of the Hydrographical Amazonian System. The majority of them are navigable and the main river crossing the department is the Amazon. Its numerous curves are always changing and sometimes make for a difficult journey. The width between banks of the Amazon

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<sup>2</sup> Source: <http://www.inei.gob.pe/>

sometimes measures 4 km. The Yavari River runs from Peru to Brazil. The Putumayo River serves as a border with Colombia. The Ucayali and the Marañón Rivers penetrate Loreto after going through the Pongo de Manseriche (Living in Peru n.d.).

A large community of foreigners, mainly from the United States and Europe, lives in Iquitos, some having been permanent residents for years while others reside there for part of the year. Some have businesses such as restaurants and bars and several of the tourist lodges are owned by foreigners usually with a local partner. Most of the Iquitos expatriates benefit from tourism and are important mediators between the locals and the tourists. They have created a golf course and print a free newspaper for tourists in which local businesses are advertised. They are often the object of resentfulness and envy by locals who feel that foreigners are exploiting their cultural wealth. Nearly all of them are married to local women.

Today Iquitos' main financial activity is tourism, part of which is shamanic tourism. But since Iquitos is not one of the popular tourist destinations like Cuzco or Machu Picchu, and because of its limited accessibility, tourists are fewer there and competition abounds. In addition, most of the tourists that make it to Iquitos are backpackers, which implies that they do not bring as much money. Nevertheless, Iquitos has a growing reputation as a tourist community, especially as a jumping-off point for tours of the Amazon jungle and the Pacaya-Samiria National Reserve, and trips downriver to Manaus, Brazil and finally the Atlantic Ocean, which is 3,360 kilometers away.

The city itself has some attractions which make the travelers spend a couple of days there, but usually Iquitos is just the resting station between the jungle and the outer world. The local zoo, Parque de Quistococha, which has some exotic animals and various species of serpents, is located 13 kilometers outside of Iquitos. In the zoo as well as around Iquitos are a number of lagoons where people use to go swimming. Also along the Iquitos-Nauta road are a few new simple complexes with artificial lagoons or pools where locals, especially families, spent their free time. They offer swimming facilities, loud music and local food.

Ecotourism is the main reason that tourists will visit Iquitos. Most of them come to see the 25,000 species of plants, approximately 4,000 species of butterflies, and 2,000 species of fish that are often quoted to inhabit the Amazon region. Most of these tourists hear about Ayahuasca for the first time when in Iquitos or have heard about it from other travelers. During my fieldwork few people came to Iquitos exclusively for shamanic tourism. A limited number of travelers who are more adventurous might decide to try Ayahuasca out of curiosity just like they would try the local cuisine, but these will typically not develop a long term engagement with it.

A popular ecotourism destination close to Iquitos is the *Pacaya-Samiria* National Reserve, the largest protected area in Peru<sup>3</sup>. With more than 2 million hectares (8,108 sq ml), the reserve contains a vast network of lakes, lagoons, swamps and wetlands, as well the Pacaya and Samiria rivers (Iperu n.d.). Tourists spend a few days in very basic conditions and see some of the most known animals of the

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<sup>3</sup> [http://www.pacayasamiria.com.pe/pacaya\\_samiria\\_national\\_reserve.htm](http://www.pacayasamiria.com.pe/pacaya_samiria_national_reserve.htm)

region such as the giant “charapa” turtle (*Podocnemis expansa*), the “paiche” fish (*Arapaima gigas*), the pink dolphin (*Inia geoffrensis*), the black caiman (*Melanosuchus niger*), and the giant otter (*Pteronura brasiliensis*). The reserve is run by indigenous people, mainly Cocama, so it is preferable as a more authentic destination because people get to see some indigenous communities, even though they are not allowed to go deep in the reserve.

There are several indigenous groups located in relative proximity to Iquitos. The Huitoto, Bora and Ocaina belong to the Bora linguistic group. These groups are located along the Putumayo, Napo and Ampiyac rivers near the border with Colombia. The Huitoto of Peru descend from a group of Huitoto that moved from Colombia during the rubber boom (Moseley 2007). The Huitoto population at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was estimated to be 50,000 but during the rubber boom at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century it fell dramatically to about 7,000-10,000 (Flowers 1994c, Moseley 2007). The Bora can be visited by tourists on the Nanay River. They used to live in Colombia before the rubber boom and were relocated to their present location after Peru lost the war with Colombia in the 1930s.

The Yagua belong to the Peba Yagua linguistic group (Seiler-Baldinger 1994). They were greatly affected by the rubber boom and lumber industries and are now found in around 30 communities scattered in a large area from West of Iquitos to Peru’s border with Colombia and Brazil and from the Putumayo River to the Yavarí River to the south (Derbyshire 1986). An estimated 3,000 people identify themselves as Yagua. They continue to provide cheap labor for extractive activities

to this day (Seiler-Baldinger 1994).

The Cocama with an estimated population of 15,000 to 18,000, belong to the Tupi-Guarani linguistic group (Flowers 1994). Their communities are located along the Huallaga, Marañon, Nanay, Ucayali, and Amazonas rivers. They have switched to the *Castellano sharapa* that is spoken in the jungle and the Cocama language is considered endangered (Moseley 2007). They still practice ayahuasca shamanism.

The Matsés (Mayoruna) live along the Javari River, and belong to the Panoan linguistic family. During the rubber boom their area was invaded but they tried to avoid contact and little is known about them during those years (Flowers 1994b). They had several short contacts with the rubber tappers but retired after each one and built their settlements in the high jungle (Romanoff et al. 2004:139). Following the rubber boom years the area was dominated by conflict. In the 1960s the Matsés were in conflict with Peruvians and Brazilians who were opening roads for logging and rubber tapping (Flowers 1994b:234). During that period two missionaries started living with them and studying their language. The current population consists of Matsés as well as people absorbed from other groups during the years of warfare and in 2004 was estimated to be between 2000 and 2200 (Romanoff et al. 2004).

Smaller groups on which little has been written include the Orejon (Payawá), of the Tucano linguistic family, numbering 200 and the Iquito, of the Záparo linguistic family. The latter are located on the Nanay River to the Northwest of Iquitos. There are only 22-6 speakers of the language today (Moseley 2007). There is also a large area of Quechua speakers along the Napo River.

The Shipibo communities are not geographically close to Iquitos and any Shipibo living there are actually migrants from the Ucayali River. They belong to the Pano linguistic group and their population is estimated to be up to 30,000 (Behrens 1994). They are considered to have among the most powerful ayahuasqueros. Shipibo women often sell their artifacts on the streets of Iquitos while most of the other groups can be visited by tourists, either on day trips arranged by tourist offices or on longer trips accompanied by an experienced guide. Usually these visits combine getting to know to the fauna and flora of the jungle as well as the cultural wealth of its people. Indigenous groups will often perform at local festivals such as the San Juan celebration in June and their artifacts are sold at the Belén market as well as the artisan market in San Juan (municipality adjacent to Iquitos).

Tourist offices arrange for day trips to surrounding indigenous communities so that tourists can take pictures of the people in traditional attire, dance with them and buy indigenous artifacts. Most tourists return disappointed from these trips because they expected something more authentic. They notice that the people normally wear Western clothes and change for the tourists and they are bothered by the way they insist on them buying jewelry and other artifacts. Other daytrips include visits to local snake farms where one can see captured anacondas and other wild animals living in poor conditions or visit the butterfly farm, Pilpintuwasi<sup>4</sup>, owned by an Austrian woman. The latter is the only place the tourists truly like because the living conditions for the animals are more acceptable. Tourists are often disappointed

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.amazonanimalorphanage.org/>

by the other visits as well as the visits to the zoo. Boat trips are also organized to the nearby Amazon River to see the pink dolphins.

Sex tourism is a big part of Iquitos life and might even be bigger than ayahuasca tourism. It is often quoted that during the 1990s, homosexuals fled the repressive police in other cities of Peru to live in Iquitos. Many now live in Belén and some work in beauty salons near the market. A lot of them work as prostitutes in the evening. Indeed, many of the prostitutes seen around the Plaza de Armas are in fact transgender, a fact that tourists are not always aware of before such encounters. I was told many stories of tourists going to a hotel room with a prostitute only to discover that she was anatomically male. Some have not reacted well to this revelation and have been in fact violent and abusive. Prostitution seems to be thriving in Iquitos and is a favorite destination for American and European single men. In addition it is not difficult for foreign men to have relationships with local girls, often much younger, since many of the local women are looking for a way out or a way to cover their expenses at least as long as the relationship lasts. Jobs are hard to find in Iquitos, especially for women, and many young women resort to this practice even though it is frowned upon. Many of these women end up raising children from these relationships. While there is always the hope of marriage and a visa to the United States or Europe, the latter rarely happens.

## **History**

Taylor (1999) shows that there were constant relations between Andeans and



Amazonians since pre-Colombian times. The Inca Empire also had ties to the Amazon region even though these relations were more flexible and ambiguous. However, around the turn of the 17<sup>th</sup> century Spanish occupation tore down those preexisting links and a split between highland and lowland became apparent; the northern montaña frontier began to collapse (Taylor 1999:215). For a long time the lowlands were mostly left to missionaries and settlers who had failed to make their fortune elsewhere and indigenous people have been until recently marginal to the history of the continent (Maybury-Lewis 1999). The number of natives in the region when the first explorers and missionaries arrived is unclear. Numbers given by chroniclers indicate that only in the first century, 100,000 natives were baptized.

I find it important to focus on some of the exploitative history of the area that has been connected by others to the form of shamanism we know today (Tausig 1987). In addition, I am hoping that it will put current relations of power into a historical context. I will focus mostly on the rubber boom era since Iquitos was established during the rubber boom and therefore its history is intimately connected to it. In addition, it has been argued that ayahuasca shamanism was transmitted from indigenous people to mestizos during the rubber boom era. The hypothesis is that when these settlers became sick they went to indigenous healers and some might have become apprentices and upon their return started servicing their communities (Beyer 2009:301). However, if we take into account the long-existing links between jungle and Andean populations it is plausible that shamanic knowledge had been exchanged even before the rubber boom. The shamanism I observed in Iquitos is

practiced mostly by mestizos.

The history of Iquitos begins with the discovery of the Amazon River on February 12, 1542 by Francisco de Orellana (Lane 2001, Parodi 2002). The first census in the area in 1738, before the establishment of the Nanay missions, mentions 550 inhabitants in mission villages (Rumrill 1983). The first Jesuit missions in the area were established in the 1750s, and the city of Iquitos itself was founded in 1864 (Lane 2001:15) right before the height of the rubber boom, displacing local indigenous groups into more inaccessible areas (Hill 1999). Another source mentions that Iquitos was founded as a strategic outpost in 1858 (Pepper 1906:135). It was named after the indigenous group Iquito that lives on the Nanay River. Iquitos grew further in importance when the Loreto Region was established and Iquitos was assigned as its capital in 1866<sup>5</sup> (Rumrill 1983).

A big part of the sources on the history of the area comes from the Jesuits who were active in the area of Maynas between 1636 and 1768, a substantial part of which came from European countries. The internationalism of the Jesuits, who recruited members from all over the world, was met with suspicion by the Spanish crown (Cipolletti 1997:20). In 1767 the king ordered their expulsion from America and they left the area in 1768 (Santos-Granero and Barclay 2000). After staying in various prisons in the Portuguese areas on the Atlantic they returned to Europe.

The missions played an important role in paving the way for the spread of colonial institutions. Moreover, mission settlements contributed to more deaths from

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<sup>5</sup> Or in 1897 (Lane 2001).

Western diseases by concentrating indigenous populations in small areas (Hill 1999, Taylor 1999). Their effect was lasting on the population, for example in the Mainas mission region, the population fell from 200,000 in 1550 to 20,000 in 1730 (Taylor 1999:225, Hill 1999). In addition the concentration of diverse indigenous groups in small areas is responsible for the adoption of Quechua by indigenous people such as along the Napo River and the creation of colonial “tribes”. At the end of the colonial era there was a shrinkage of the colonization front (Taylor 1999).

Franciscan missionaries took over the administration of the Mainas province after the Jesuit expulsion in 1767 but withdrew from all missions in Eastern Peru in 1821. When the missions fell, a long period of relative isolation followed, lasting for most of the 19th century. The government being bankrupt because of the independence wars could not afford to support colonization projects along the Huallaga River so indigenous people enjoyed more freedom for a while (Hill 1999). Certain groups such as the Aguaruna attacked mission settlements on the upper Marañón River for over a decade causing the collapse of the administrative center in Borja in 1841 and forcing its inhabitants to relocate to Iquitos. The first steamships arrived in the area in 1854 (Rumrill 1983) and by 1864 Iquitos had a fleet of steamships making regular runs between Yurimaguas and the Brazilian border (Hill 1999:744, Rumrill 1983:23). Major export products were tobacco, cotton, salted fish, straw hats, palm fiber hammocks, sarsaparilla, and rubber (Rumrill 1983). Total trade grew fifteen times between 1854 and 1876. The indigenous people of the area had to withdraw to more inaccessible sites after the arrival of the steamships

(Hill 1999).

By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the lowlands had become sources of raw materials based on an extractive economy. Peru conceded control of large areas of forest to European corporations in exchange for debt relief. In addition to this indigenous people found themselves caught in border disputes between nation-states (Hill 1999). Hill notes (1999:710) “In the epistemological and political murkiness between weak national control and neo-colonial greed, some native peoples suffered total annihilation while others found ways to survive until the end of the Rubber Boom through resistance, accommodation, or migration to remote places of safety”.

Iquitos became a valuable port toward the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century with the exportation of rubber. The city grew from 277 inhabitants in 1850 to 15,000 in 1867, the beginning of the rubber boom (Taylor 1999). Its population in 1905 was 20,000. In the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Iquitos was mentioned as the centre of the rubber trade for Peru (Pepper 1906:135) since all the exports of rubber passed through Iquitos.

The main labor force that collected rubber consisted of mestizos who entered the work force voluntarily and members of a number of indigenous groups of the area, such as the Witoto, Bora and Andoke (Zerner 2000:94). A great deal of atrocities have been committed against indigenous people involved, the most notorious case being that of Putumayo, an area between Peru, Ecuador and Colombia where the greatest violence against indigenous people took place. This portion of Amazonian history is described as a holocaust by Hvalkof (2000). The Witoto and

the Bora were nearly wiped out during the rubber boom (Taylor 1999). In the following pages, I will focus on the effects the extraction of rubber had on the indigenous people of the area, whose descendents populate the area today; in addition, I will look at some of the reasons why the rubber boom was not followed by sustained economic development.

The rubber kings that were responsible for the enslavement and decimation of indigenous people, Carlos Fitzcarrald, Máximo Rodríguez, Julio Arana and others, are seen today, by the Peruvian state, as fearless pioneers and defenders of the Peruvian sovereignty and are presented as national heroes (Rummenhoeller 1985:6). These characters have achieved mythological status even through foreign media, one example being Werner Herzog's film "Fitzcarrald", and are used as standards in the modern colonization and development efforts of the Amazon.

The rubber boom was the first phase of the integration of Amazonia to the world market that resulted to dependency. Labor in the area was scarce and this was not the first time that colonizers resorted to enslavement of indigenous populations. As a result, there were radical changes in the demographic and settlement patterns in the Amazon. In the rubber producing zones, the forced relocation of local peoples has created an ethnic patchwork. In addition, epidemics had detrimental effects. Enock (1913:47) argues that if the indigenous people were paid wages, "it would not pay to gather wild rubber at all or only by increasing its price in the world's market very considerably".

The most criticized aspect of the rubber industry was debt peonage. The

credit contract is often described as a form of ‘debt peonage’ or ‘slavery’<sup>6</sup>. The patron made an advanced payment, most often in kind, to the peon who had to pay off his debt with work. The amount of work was determined by the patron and failure to comply was met with severe punishment. In the Upper Amazon, this system was called *habilitación*, and was intimately connected to the extractive economy and to the market. The *habilitación* system functions as a hierarchy of interconnected debt relations in an exploitation chain (Hardenburg 1913:203). The system is set up in such a way that there is an accumulation of debt at the production level (Hvalkof 2000) and it is only the top strata of the hierarchy that can make capital. Debt was inheritable and patrons benefited from accumulated debts through generations. Indebted indigenous families would be traded. This evolved to a slave trade run by the contractors involved in extractive enterprises. Soon, it developed to an extractive economy of its own. Armed slave raiding, *correrías*, became widespread in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries (Santos-Granero and Barclay 2000). A market for slaves was established in Iquitos and slaves were exported to Brazil or to patrons in other areas. The systems of *enganche* and *habilitación* continue in the Peruvian Amazon, and slavery was common in certain areas until a short time ago (Hvalkof 2000).

At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, foreign observers developed the attitude

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<sup>6</sup> See Wolf and Wolf, *Rubber*, p. 34; Alberto Chirif and Carlos Mora, 'La Amazonia Peruana', in *Historia del Peru*, Juan Mejia Baca (ed.), Tomo XII (Lima, 1980), p. 285; Susanna Hecht and Alexander Cockburn, *The Fate of the Forest: Developers, Destroyers and Defenders of the Amazon* (New York, 1989), p. 62; Bakx, 'From Proletarian to Peasant', pp. 147-8; and Fearnside, 'Extractive Reserves', p. 388.

that the Amazon was a paradise to be exploited. The prospects of profit attracted many foreign firms to the area. The export of rubber from the Department of Loreto in Peru increased dramatically in the 1880s (San Román 1994:141-2) and people of various nationalities flooded the Amazon attempting to get rich. The Putumayo area was isolated, rich in rubber trees and settled by thousands of indigenous people. There was minimal contact between villages as they were self-sufficient and there was inter-tribal tension and conflict. Lacking the unity and the technology it was impossible for them to fight off white invaders. The first Colombian rubber traders began operating in the area in the 1870s. They faced a number of problems such as transportation, supplies and credit. Thus, starting in 1890s, the Colombians increased their contact with a Peruvian who had access to the above: Julio Cesar Arana. He was described as a tireless worker who acquired much power and wealth in the Putumayo region because of his role as creditor and middleman (Stanfield 1984:22).

In 1898, Arana moved his business headquarters from Yurimaguas on the Huallaga River, to Iquitos (Santos-Granero and Barclay 2000, Stanfield 1998). During this decade, Arana had many partnerships with Colombians operating in the area. By the end of the century, a lot of them were indebted to him and were absorbed by him often using violence (Davis 1997). Arana used the same technique on the Colombians that they had used on the indigenous people. He used the lack of unity of the Colombians to increase his own business operations in the Putumayo. In 1903 Arana formed the company *Arana y Hermanos* with various other family members and established a branch in Brazil (Goodman 2010, Zerner 2000). In 1904

and 1905, the company established its own regional centers in the Putumayo for the collection of the rubber. This led to violent clashes with the Colombian traders and the elimination of the Colombians as competitors (Davis 1997).

The organization of the company was the key to its success. Arana divided the region and his employees into well-defined sections. The section managers were paid on a commission basis, which gave more incentive and encouraged the extreme exploitation of the indigenous populations. The Aranas “freely resorted to mutilation, torture, and murder as means of intimidating and disciplining the native population” (Weinstein 1983:26). The indigenous people were seen as “grown up children” (Enock 1913:38). They were also viewed either as thieves and untrustworthy infidels, or more positively, as savages becoming civilized (Stanfield 1984:25). In addition, the charge of cannibalism granted the Aranas the moral and legal basis to enslave indigenous people defined as savages (Stanfield 1998:206). As Stanfield (1998) notes however, the claims of cannibalism were never founded on reality.

Casa Arana is estimated to have used 12,000 (San Román 1994:159) or 13,600 (Pineda 2000:72) indigenous people at its peak. The company used force in order to subjugate indigenous people while they used many types of resistance. One was to flee to isolated areas. Those who escaped were pursued and punished by the Barbadians hired by Arana (Goodman 2010) as an example to the rest. A lot of the time their heads was all that was returned to the section stations. The response to violent resistance was even more violence. On the other hand, this brutal system increased the production of rubber in the Putumayo dramatically (Stanfield 1984).



During the colonial period as well as after it, the area of Putumayo was claimed by Peru, Ecuador and Colombia and this was the cause of boundary disputes. The Peruvian state established its presence in the area by establishing a naval base in Iquitos. After the defeat of Peru in the War of the Pacific, new military bases were formed in Loreto at the same time that the rubber industry was developing (Stanfield 1984). This economic expansion was detrimental to the Indian population, who according to the philosophy of the time should be ignored, while energy and resources were spent on the cultural and artistic development of the elite<sup>7</sup>. Arana's expansion, therefore, was consistent with these developments. He also enjoyed the support of the Civilista Party, who was reformist elitist, and culturally Western, leaving no room for *indigenismo*<sup>8</sup> in the party's program (Stanfield 1984:36). The government, trying to create sovereignty over the disputed region, supported Arana's campaign to eliminate the Colombians from the Putumayo region. It was also believed that the order imposed by Arana would attract foreign investment.

Mistreatment of indigenous people had been reported since the 1880s and 1890s, but nothing had been done about it. In 1907, Saldaña Rocca, an Iquitos journalist published a series of articles locally accusing Arana of serious crimes (Collier 1968). Later, the atrocities were made public by two American travelers,

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<sup>7</sup> This attack on Indigenous people and traditions was legitimized by Alejandro O. Deustua, professor at the University of San Marcos in Lima.

<sup>8</sup> *Indigenismo* was a movement of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that attacked racist assumptions of Indian inferiority and suggested that the path to national renewal lay in indigenous principles of reciprocity and cooperation (Peru Reader 1995:216).

Walter E. Hardenburg and W. B. Perkins who attracted international attention to the area. Traveling down the Putumayo River from Colombia, they entered the area of the Peruvian company Casa Arana or Peruvian Amazon Company. They witnessed (and were almost killed) the taking over of the area between Putumayo and Caquetá by the company aided by the Peruvian army. They were captured by the Peruvians and their supplies were stolen. Hardenburg arrived in Iquitos almost penniless and worked for a while. He made contact with Saldaña Rocca who helped him collect material on the Putumayo (Goodman 2010). His story was printed in the 1909 in the sensationalistic weekly Truth. Hardenburg claimed that indigenous people worked for no pay, were often savagely whipped and were starved or killed by company employees (Hardenburg 1913:164). Following is his summary of the situation in the extraction area controlled by the company:

1. The pacific indigenous people of the Putumayo are forced to work day and night at the extraction of rubber, without the slightest remuneration except the food necessary to keep them alive.
2. They are kept in the most complete nakedness many of them not even possessing the biblical fig leaf.
3. They are robbed of their crops, their women and their children to satisfy the voracity, lasciviousness, and avarice of this company and its employees, who live on their food and violate their women.
4. They are sold wholesale and retail in Iquitos, at prices that range from £20 to £40 each.
5. They are flogged inhumanly until their bones are laid bare, and great raw sores cover them.
6. They are given no medical treatment, but are left to die, eaten by maggots, when they serve as food for the chiefs' dogs.
7. They are castrated and mutilated, and their ears, fingers arms and legs are cut off.
8. They are tortured by means of fire and water, and by tying them up, crucified head down.
9. Their houses and crops are burned and destroyed wantonly and for amusement.
10. They are cut to pieces and dismembered with knives, axes and machetes.

11. Their children are grasped by the feet and their heads are dashed against the trees and walls until their brains fly out.

12. Their old folk are killed when they are no longer able to work for the company.

13. Men, women, and children are shot to provide amusement for the employees or to celebrate the *sabado de gloria* [Easter Saturday], or, in preference to this, they are burned with kerosene so that the employees may enjoy their desperate agony.

In addition to this, during my subsequent investigations in Iquitos I obtained from a number of eye-witnesses accounts of many of the abominable outrages that take place here hourly, and these, with my own observation are the basis of the indictment.

[Hardenburg 1913:185]

Religious groups were appalled and played a major role in the scandal that developed along with the *Anti-Slavery and Aborigines Protection Society*. Under their pressure, in 1910, the company allowed a commission to travel the Putumayo and investigate the current living conditions of the indigenous people (Goodman 2010). The Peruvian Amazon Company chose five men as its representatives and the British government was represented by Roger Casement, British consul in Para, Brazil. Casement interviewed the Barbadians working for the company and supported the allegations of Rocca and Hardenburg (Goodman 2010). He came to the conclusion that these crimes were not isolated incidents but were part of a system.

According to Enock, the crimes were committed by the “Barbadian Negroes at the order of the Peruvian chiefs of sections”, who were chosen because of their “savage depth” (1913:39). Some 196 Barbadians had been brought over in 1904-05 (Paternoster 1913:83). Casement cites cases of mistreatment of these men as well. But even though they were mistreated, they rarely objected as “their employers had an ingenious way of keeping them in subjection” (Paternoster 1913:85). By this he

meant the debt peonage system described earlier. Many of the witnesses that testified to Roger Casement were in debt and they “had been promised that if they would consent to deceive Sir Roger as to the treatment of the natives, their indebtedness would be wiped out of the company’s books” (Paternoster 1913:86).

Peru’s reaction to the scandal was to deny everything and blame everything on the Colombians. After the exposure of the scandal, the Peruvian government sent a commission of its own to the Putumayo, which confirmed what had been published. 237 warrants were issued against the criminals, but nobody was actually prosecuted (Goodman 2010). By 1913 when Paternoster’s book was published, those responsible for the crimes had not been arrested or punished and Paternoster makes an argument for justice and their punishment.

The oncoming of the rubber boom changed the areas in fundamental ways and its effects can be seen even today. Indigenous populations were immensely reduced or displaced. San Román speaks of ‘Indian Hunts’ (1994:153). Many indigenous people were captured, killed or others escaped to the interior of the jungle away from the riverbanks (San Román 1994:157). Disease also contributed to the decline of the population. Many indigenous groups left the areas where they traditionally lived<sup>9</sup> while others disappeared. The contact with outsiders has also caused cultural changes. The cultural influence was of course mutual to the point that today’s jungle culture is a synthesis of the relations that were created by the rubber boom (San Román 1994:162).

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<sup>9</sup> One such example are the Piro or Yine who have been dispersed to different Peruvian locations and their history has been irrevocably changed. See Gow, 1991, 1992 and 2001.

The rubber boom also created a feudal system of relations in Amazonia that influenced the way indigenous people were treated even after the end of rubber extraction. Indigenous people remained trapped and subjected in a feudal system and came to possess the lower stratum of this system. Villages gave place to *fundos* or *haciendas*, where life revolved around the feudal house (San Román 1994:163). Agricultural production declined because of the lack of workers. There was a lack of regional products, a fact that increased imports and the dependence on the rubber barons.

For the reasons already mentioned the rubber extraction did not contribute to the development of the Amazon region. Instead, it made the area vulnerable to European influence and promoted patterns of dependence. This perspective is most evident in accounts such as San Román's. According to this view, even though exceptional profits accrued from the rubber trade they were transferred out of the region and thus made unavailable for local development. Another view sees the main consequences of extraction, including that of wild rubber, to be the underdevelopment of Amazonia and marginalization of its rural people (Bunker 1985). Weinstein (1983) has argued that sustained economic development in the post-boom period was frustrated not by surplus drainage from Amazonia but by the persistence of precapitalist relations of production. Precapitalist relations effectively blocked regional development by stifling capital accumulation, modernization of the wild rubber industry, and the development of significant internal markets and other sectors (Weinstein 1983). According to Barham and Coomes (1994), the Amazon

rubber industry produced substantial surplus and that a significant portion of the surplus, due to the very organization of the rubber industry, was retained by local economic agents that included the state. Large profits were accrued during the rubber boom but this did not result in their investment for the development of the area.

As Stanfield (1998) stresses, what happened in Putumayo was the result of many factors including local realities, international systems as well as national policies. The crimes that were committed there should only be seen in the larger context of international trade, nationalism and colonialism. As the importance of the Amazon for rubber supply declined, the Putumayo scandal was forgotten. But the exploitation of indigenous people did not stop. After the scandal, some reforms were made but Arana's power was not challenged and there was no alteration in the basic structure of exploiting indigenous people. Some indigenous people were still forced to migrate thousands of miles.

The First World War removed the Putumayo scandal from the spotlight and replaced it with greater atrocities. At the same time "when low-cost rubber from British plantations in Asia flooded world markets in the 1910s, rubber prices plummeted, sharply curtailing financial returns from wild rubber extraction" (Barham and Coomes 1994:73). Even though the profits were largely undercut, the First World War created a demand for rubber that kept Arana's company in operation until 1920. Arana held on to the area until 1939 and died in 1952 in Lima. During this time, violence still persisted in Western Amazonia.

As we saw, conquest of the jungle was driven by powerful economic

interests; this created a discourse that dehumanized indigenous people and turned them into resources to be harvested (Hill 1999:744). Indigenous people were stereotyped as wild, cannibalistic savages (Hill 1999:745). The rubber boom was the most definitive period in the history of the area and Hill (1999:753) goes as far as to say that “had it not been for the rapid decline of rubber gathering in lowland South America, it is doubtful that any indigenous peoples of the southern lowlands would have survived in the twentieth century”.

After the boom came to an end Iquitos lost its glory. The Amazon region started attracting colonists who cleared land for cattle and coffee plantations. The relations of dominance and dependence between Indians and patrons were preserved for long after the end of the rubber boom (Maybury-Lewis 1999). Indigenous communities in the area were also affected by the war with Ecuador in 1941 and it was not until the 1960s that the lowlands moved into the center of national thinking. The population of Iquitos increased considerably in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century due to migration from the jungle, and the city expanded and became increasingly more urbanized (Rumrill 1983). Exportation of lumber increased during that period.

During president Belaúnde’s term (1963-1968) there were plans for the development of the Amazon with ambitious projects of colonization that were disastrous for the indigenous people of the area such as the Matsés who attempted to defend themselves against the colonists and were forced to hide into the jungle (Maybury-Lewis 1999:921). Belaúnde’s government was followed by a military

regime during which time the anthropologist Stefano Varese was put in charge of developing a policy for the lowland Indians. But this process of protecting indigenous cultures was reversed with the fall of the military regime (Maybury-Lewis 1999). In the 1970s coca trade and armed revolutionary movements dominate Peruvian Amazonia. New indigenous federations (such as the AIDSESEP) have given voice to indigenous peoples especially in the 1980s. The latest Peruvian constitution recognizes and protects the ethnic and cultural plurality of the nation (Maybury-Lewis 1999:936), a great shift from the previous ideology of objectifying indigenous people and treating them as resources or obstacles to progress. The new found appreciation of indigenous knowledge can be seen in the recent declaration of ayahuasca as cultural patrimony (see Appendix 5).

### **Theoretical considerations**

My study draws from a variety of approaches and uses a number of different lenses. Since this is an ethnographically grounded project, the most important lens would be the anthropological one. Because of the nature of my subject I will be dealing a lot with “the more elusive topics of the perception, cognition and expression of reality” (Cohen 1984:227). My larger theoretical perspective is a cultural constructionist one. My main concern was to look at how Amazonian shamanism and ayahuasca in particular are constructed in different cultural contexts by different agents. Because a large part of my subject matter was not observable, a big chunk of my analysis falls in the realm of metanarrative; it is a story about many



different stories that I collected in the field. These stories mostly consist of reflections and interpretations of the actors' experience. In addition, my perspective is cultural relativist, approaching Western culture as exotic as Amazonian culture. My intention was not to favor one over the other.

The concept of *tourism* has been central in my research. Tourism is not a recent phenomenon. For centuries affluent people have traveled to distant parts of the world to see great monuments, natural landmarks and experience new things. The word "tourist" first appeared in print as a noun in 1800, and "tourism" in 1811 (van den Berghe 1994) even though the activity itself is much older than that. Tourism was defined as people traveling abroad for periods of over 24 hours. Smith (1989:1) has defined a tourist as "a temporarily leisured person who voluntarily visits a place away from home for the purpose of experiencing a change". Some scholars tend to define tourism as "travel for leisure" but others do not make a distinction between travel and tourism (Chambers 2000). I tend to use the word tourism in this later sense as "any kind of travel activity that includes the self-conscious experience of another place" (Chambers 2000:xii).

Anthropological studies of tourism have traditionally either focused on the origins of tourism or its impact, providing only a partial picture of the phenomenon (Stronza 2001) and they usually come in the form of ethnographic studies of tourist places. Anthropology took a late interest in tourism as a focus of study; some early works appeared in the 1970s (Smith 1989, Graburn and Jafari 1991). This increase in interest might have been because of a shift within the anthropological paradigm, as

anthropologists today are more likely to not view cultures as distinct entities—due to globalization—but are more inclined to study processes that link places and diverse people. Anthropologists have often focused on the negative impact of tourism, often seeing the market forces that drive modern tourism as a form of imperialism (Nash 1996). Local communities are often seen as passive receivers of tourism. Other studies have showed that there might be benefits as well (Harrison 1992, Smith 1989). For example, tourism may promote the maintenance of traditions and increase pride in local forms of culture (Graburn 1976), or ecotourism can be a vehicle for indigenous communities of communicating and perpetuating indigenosity in an effort to secure control over their resources (Zografos and Kenrick 2005). Cohen has also argued that commoditization does not necessarily destroy the meaning of cultural products (1988:383). Others have pointed out the ambivalence of tourism (Simpson 1992). In any case tourism studies have increased and some see tourism as a “social practice to be studied in its own right” (Bruner 2005:7).

The issue of authenticity has concerned many anthropologists. The main concern is that visitors’ expectations of authenticity have an impact on local culture, altering it beyond recognition. MacCannell (1989) claims that the “producers of culture” understand the modern craving for the authentic, and they create tourist attractions that appear authentic but clearly are not. Thus, tourists are in a sense cheated. Others have pointed out that the concept of authenticity itself is culturally constructed and that only the educated middle-classes are concerned with it, while others are satisfied with sites that have been created for tourist purposes (Cohen

1988). The example of ethnic tourism is very relevant. Ethnic tourism, as defined by van den Berghe as “where the tourist actively searches for ethnic exoticism” (1994:8), but he adds that the great irony is that ethnic tourism is self-destroying because it consumes the commodity it searches: the authentic other (van den Berghe 1994:9). Bruner (2005) urges anthropologists to not think along the terms of authenticity as opposed to inauthenticity but regard culture as always alive and changing. This way every cultural act is authentic. Cultures constantly reinvent themselves, and so do practices such as shamanism. Bruner also distinguishes between the metanarratives of the tourism industry and the travel narratives of the tourists themselves. He says that “metanarratives are the largest conceptual frame within which tourism operates” (2005:21).

Clifford (1997), critiques the quest for pure, distinct cultures. He says that intercultural connection is and has been the norm and introduces the concept of “traveling cultures” - culture imagined not as bounded, homogeneous, and local, but as processes of encounter and exchange between people who both travel and stay home. He argues that

anthropological ‘culture’ is not what it used to be. And once the representational challenge is seen to be the portrayal and understanding of local/global historical encounters . . . one needs to focus on hybrid, cosmopolitan experiences as much as on rooted, native ones. In my current problematic, the goal is not to *replace* the cultural figure ‘native’ with the intercultural figure ‘traveler.’ Rather, the task is to focus on concrete mediations of the two. [Clifford 1997:24]

Because of the uniqueness of shamanic tourism and the spiritual pursuits embedded in it, I believe that it would be useful to look at it through the lens of

studies on *pilgrimage*. A pilgrimage has been defined as “a journey resulting from religious causes, externally to a holy site, and internally for spiritual purposes and internal understanding” (Barber, 1993:1). However, today it can also be viewed as a modern secular journey (Collins-Kreiner 2009). In looking at some of the anthropological literature on pilgrimage one can easily find commonalities between shamanic tourism and pilgrimage. The two major themes of this dissertation, healing and the transformation of the self seem to be central themes of pilgrimages around the world (Dubisch and Winkelman 2005). Other commonalities include the symbolism of the physical journey itself, the communication between the self and the sacred and the ritual structuring of experience. According to Morinis (1992:4) pilgrimage is one’s journey toward a physical place or emotional state that represents the ideals that person wishes to achieve. During my fieldwork it was clear to me that for the participants in ayahuasca ceremonies there was both a physical and an emotional journey involved.

Pilgrimage and tourism have either been seen as related or essentially dissimilar (Cohen 1992: 48). While pilgrimage is travel for religious purposes, tourism is seen as a secular activity and for some scholars, pilgrimage and tourism have completely different goals and are therefore essentially dissimilar (Boorstin 1964). However, the connection between the two was pointed out by Victor and Edith Turner, when they wrote “a tourist is half a pilgrim, if a pilgrim is half a tourist” (1978:20). Thus, for some scholars tourism is a quasi-pilgrimage during which the tourists engage with another culture to gain experiences they cannot have

at home, and see tourism as a sacred quest for cultural significance (Graburn 1989, MacCannell 1973). An important part of this quest is the search for authenticity that modern middle-class subjects feel they lack in their lives (MacCannell 1989).

Some scholars have looked at the transformative effect of travel and pilgrimage. Tourist discourse emphasizes the transformation of the self by the travel experience and the contact with different people and cultures. Bruner (1991) argues in contrast, that the tourist self is changed very little by the tour, while the consequences of tourism for the native self are profound. Third World cultural displays serve as a mirror for Western fantasies, reflecting back in performance what the tourists desire. On the other hand, research on backpacking has shown that this form of travel is often perceived as resulting in profound self-change as reported by the tourists (Noy 2004). Others have shown the connection between travel and identity (Desforges 2000, Elsrud 2001) or travel and transitional stages in life (Rosh White and White 2005).

The *anthropology of globalization* has also provided a valuable lens. Early cultural theorists (Wallerstein 1974) have conceived globalization as a unifying force that would eventually extinguish local differences. In addition, the core-periphery model seems to be inadequate to describe current developments. Tsing (1993) critiqued those theorists who presumed that everything global emerged from the North (the core) and was imposed on the recipient South. It is true in the case of ayahuasca that a demand in the West for spiritual as well as healing alternatives has created an extensive market for ayahuasca and shamanism in general. This does not

necessarily mean however that the flow is one way. Several recent ethnographies show that reality is more complex than that. More specifically, local agents are no longer portrayed as the victims of imposed foreign models and global forces that undermine “traditional” ways of life but as agents whose activities power the global flows. Indeed an increasing number of indigenous people capitalize on their traditional ways and authenticity in order to reinforce their identity in the international arena (Zografos and Kenrick 2005). Thus, globalization demands new types and strategies of resistance and negotiation.

In this dissertation the study of globalization occurs through the investigation of the local milieu of Iquitos. As Watts (1992:18) has pointed out “globalization processes are always experienced and mediated locally”, therefore their study calls for the examination of these local sites. Ayahuasca is the common thread that brings together local and Peruvian actors in the context of Iquitos, having turned into a commodity in the recent years. Commodity is defined by Gregory as “a socially desirable thing with a use-value and an exchange value” (1982:10). Even though many of my consultants would be uncomfortable with the term commodity, ayahuasca is socially desirable in certain circles in the West and has a high exchange value for local Amazonian people, therefore deserves the classification as a “commodity”. As Appadurai (1986) has argued, the marketplace is culturally defined and varies through time and space. Similarly, ayahuasca holds different meaning in different social spaces and these meanings determine its exchange value.

Since a large part of this study deals with conceptions of healing I looked to

*medical anthropology* for an appropriate theoretical framework. Several medical anthropologists have outlined classifications of medical systems. Kleinman, the most influential medical anthropologist today, introduced the distinction between illness, disease and sickness. While disease is the pathological state and the arena of biomedicine, illness refers to the perceptions and experience of disease. Finally sickness is a blanket term that includes both illness and disease. Anthropology's domain seems to be the area of illness, the area I will be focusing on, which was defined by Hahn (1996) as an undesirable condition of the self. Specifically, in chapter 3, I will be looking at what Kleinman (1978) calls explanatory models of illness, a set of beliefs that "contain any or all of five issues: etiology; onset of symptoms; pathophysiology; course of sickness (severity and type of sick role); and treatment" (Kleinman 1978:87-88).

Kleinman (1980) made a similar distinction between curing and healing. I will be using the term healing in that sense of the process by which the sufferer gains a degree of relief through the reduction or elimination of their illness. This relief or improvement is not necessarily the same as curing a disease in the biomedical sense. However it can occur as part of the curing process. Kleinman (1980) also identifies the three stages of the healing ritual: sickness is labeled with an appropriate cultural category, the label is ritually manipulated (culturally transformed) and finally a new label is applied (cured, well). In chapter 5 I will show how this plays out in the context I studied.

George Foster created a scheme (1976) in which he divides medical systems

in personalistic and naturalistic. In personalistic systems disease results from purposeful intervention of an agent, such as evil spirits, other spirits when offended, curse or witchcraft by other humans. In this scheme, there is little room for accident or chance and illness is only one of a number of misfortunes brought about in this way. Amazonian shamanism would fall into this category, since illness is mostly diagnosed in these terms. In naturalistic systems, disease results from natural forces or conditions, such as the environment, an upset in body's equilibrium, aging etc.. The familiar biomedical system is a naturalistic system. In the context of shamanic tourism the personalistic explanations of the shamans come together with the naturalistic ones of westerners and often there is a shift in the way westerners view illness.

I also looked at anthropological studies of sorcery starting with Evans-Pritchard's (1976) work on the Azande, which is one of the most important in the discussion of witchcraft and sorcery. He used the Azande's distinctions and showed that ideas of witchcraft for the Azande functioned as a means of explaining misfortunes that could not be explained otherwise. For him these ideas were a reasonable way for the Azande to explain things and also gave shape to their moral worlds. Witchcraft accusations were a means of expressing and discharging tensions between people.

For Mary Douglas witchcraft is an alleged psychic force; "an anti-social psychic power with which persons in relatively unstructured areas of society are credited, the accusation being a means of exerting control where practical forms of



control are difficult” (1966:102). Witches defined like this are marginal. Witchcraft can also be involuntary. Sorcery for Douglas is a form of harmful power which makes use of spells, words, actions and physical materials; it “can only be used consciously and deliberately” (1966:107). The centrality of intention in sorcery has also been stressed by Whitehead and Wright (2004).

The political implications of sorcery will also not be ignored. As a point of departure I will take Mary Douglas’ argument that “beliefs which attribute spiritual power to individuals are never neutral or free of the dominant patterns of social structure” (1966:112). Thus, the discussion of sorcery and witchcraft accusations in Iquitos should be taken in the context of social structures and conflicts in the local milieu. Evans-Pritchard also argued that witchcraft accusations indicate social conflicts. In Iquitos, the phenomenon of witchcraft and the frequent accusations are a result of the strained local economy and the antagonism between shamans competing for the few tourists. Ayahuasca tourism is limited and the income the tourists bring is highly desirable. In this context, sorcery becomes a battle for limited resources and a means of exerting power.

Numerous scholars (Salomon 1983, Taussig 1987) have shown that existing sorcery systems are as much a result of historical forces such as colonialism as of internal forces. New situations such as tourism can change the local dynamics and create new uses for powers such as sorcery. Research in Africa has shown that witchcraft and sorcery accusations are reflections of the upheavals of community life brought on by labor migration, and the movements of people (Stewart and Strathern

2004). Victor Turner has also shown witchcraft accusations as the surface indicators of underlying conflicts over land and power (1972 [1957]).

I also consulted anthropological studies of *ritual*. For the purposes of this study I found that Victor Turner's (1969) model of anti-structure and liminality was more useful than a Durkheimian model of ritual reinforcing social structure.

Durkheim argued that "religion is a set of ideas and practices by which people sacralize the social structure and bonds of the community" (Bell 1997:24) while ritual is what brings people together as a collective group. This is not an adequate theoretical framework for this study because we are dealing with ritual that challenges social order and has a strong transformational component.

The concept of liminality comes from the Latin word *limen*, which means a threshold. Van Gennep's (1960) model of rites of passage includes a transitional or *liminal* phase, which he called "betwixt and between", during which a person is suspended in time and a place "symbolically outside the conventional sociocultural order" (Bell 1997:36). *Liminality* refers to this stage; during this time there is a certain ambiguity because the person is between classifications not yet incorporated into a new identity or status and might not be limited by social expectations that come with certain roles. Van Gennep also emphasized the importance of rites of passage to the psychological well-being of individuals (Bell 1997:37).

I would also argue, and will show, that participants in ayahuasca ceremonies often experience what can be described as *communitas*, which Turner formulates in opposition to structure (1975). As opposed to rituals that intent to demarcate clear

boundaries between groups, Turner (1975:238) argues that in certain situations “rituals may be performed in which egalitarian and cooperative behavior is characteristic, and in which secular distinctions of rank, office, and status are temporarily in abeyance or regarded as irrelevant”. During this time *communitas* may spontaneously emerge between the members of the group and they may wish to temporarily “doff the masks, cloaks, apparel, and insignia of status” (Turner 1975:243). In fact to maximize *communitas* one has to minimize any external marks of status. Often in interviews, people described to me this exact feeling of losing everything that identifies them in society and just being authentic human beings during an ayahuasca ceremony. In the case of ayahuasca rituals, participants are physically temporarily away from their culture and their social roles; metaphorically they intentionally step outside culture by ingesting a hallucinogen that challenges the very cultural categories that they take for granted. In this context they experience *communitas* and personal transformation. A viable theory of ritual for this context should account for rituals that capacitate personal transformation through temporary removal from social structure, but also by challenging cultural categories themselves through the ingestion of a powerful hallucinogen.

When discussing ritual change Bell (1997) argues that a new paradigm of ritual has emerged, which I find a better point of departure for analyzing ayahuasca rituals. This model approaches ritual as a mode of expression, “a special type of language suited to what it is there to express, namely internal spiritual-emotional resources tied to our true identities but frequently unknown and undeveloped. Ritual

expression of these internal dimensions will unleash their healing power for the self and others” (Bell 1997:241). This is a paradigm of ritual that looks more inward, at internal processes of the self, rather than outward, at social structure. The dominant metaphors are those of wholeness and attainment (Bell 1997).

Since I will be looking at the issue of ritual and the self in part III of the dissertation, I also draw from the subfield of psychological anthropology known as *anthropology of the self*. Specifically, I will be looking at how the psychedelic experience challenges ideas about the boundedness of the self and how the individual self is constructed through the ayahuasca experience.

Throop has identified two approaches of the concept of the self in anthropology; the constructivist approach assumes that “socio-cultural processes play a pivotal role in constructing perceptual and knowledge based realities” (2000:31), while the experiential approach focuses more on the individual’s experience. Marcel Mauss (1938) was the first one who discussed cultural variations of the concept of the self throughout Western history asserting that earlier human communities had a more sociocentric conception of the person; in addition, he argued that the notion of the self as a unique individual possessing self-consciousness, the “cult of the self” is of recent origin. Benedict and Mead also saw the human subject as a culture bearing organism. Ruth Benedict (1934) stressed cultural conditioning and emphasized the relativity of cultural habits as central to the human condition. Margaret Mead had similar views on the influence of culture in shaping the individual (Mead 1935, 1949).

Historically, anthropology has been more concerned with the collective and the ways society and culture shape individuals and their behavior. In non-Western cultures sociality is perceived as a prerequisite for the experiencing self. However, the dichotomy of individual and group might be a false one. Hallowell (1953) saw self and society as co-existent and inter-dependent. Similar to anthropological conceptualizations of identity, this understanding of non-Western selves points exclusively to elements shared with others and not to individual features. By looking at more subjective accounts Hollan (1992) shows that anthropologists have exaggerated the differences between the egocentric Western self and the sociocentric non-Western self and in reality there are degrees of egocentrism or sociocentrism in all cultural contexts. He argues that the task for anthropologists now is to investigate the manner and the extent that various cultural models of the self “are actually ‘lived by’ and thereby to ascertain the range of the experiential self as well” (Hollan 1992:295).

Harris (1989) proposed to use the term self to refer to the human being as the locus of experience. It has been assumed that Western culture values agency and autonomy and a bounded, secular and temporalized sense of self. In the West the self is perceived as bounded and separate, unique to each individual, and the locus of awareness, emotion and action, while in non-Western cultures we find more sociocentric notions of the self with more flexible boundaries between self and other. This has not always been so in the West as historian John Lyons (1978) argues that the centrality of the self was a product of late 18<sup>th</sup> century thought. In addition,

scholars like Spiro (1993) challenge the degree of difference between Western and non-Western conceptions of the self.

Consequently, anthropological discourse diverts attention from actual individuals and selves. It is true that individuals are shaped by society, but culture and society are not mechanistic reproducers of themselves. Even though the self is not autonomous, but social, as well as cultural, the self is not passive—it has agency, is active and creative. In fact, what we consider the “self” in the West is both what sets us apart from others as well as ties us to the other people in our culture (Erchak 1992). As Cohen (1994) put it “constituted by society and made competent by culture, individuals make their worlds through their acts of perception and interpretation. The external world is filtered, and, in the process, remade by the self” (115). Ewing argues that the concept of a cohesive self is illusory and proposes that “individuals are continuously reconstituting themselves into new selves in response to internal and external stimuli” (1990:258). In the context of shamanic tourism the role of the psychedelic experience in this process is instrumental.

### **Description of research project and methodology**

The central goal of this research project was to examine the ways in which ayahuasca is constructed, perceived and represented in different settings, by different agents, specifically by westerners in the context of shamanic tourism. This study is the product of 17 months of fieldwork, which was conducted from November 2003 to May 2004 and September 2004 to April 2005, with a preliminary fieldwork period

of two months in 2002. 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 co-exist, namely the urban mestizo use and the Western one, creating the cultural milieu of shamanic tourism (see chapter 3). In this study, it will become evident what verbalizations, images, metaphors, etc., constitute the means of culturalizing the visionary experience within the Iquitos milieu.

The specific questions that guided my dissertation are:

1. How have attitudes toward shamanism and hallucinogens evolved historically in the West? What does this history teach us about our relationship with the “other”? How does ayahuasca tourism fit into this history?
2. What are the main motives of westerners pursuing ayahuasca experiences?
3. What are the benefits reported by Western ayahuasca users?
4. What forms does ayahuasca practice take in the context of shamanic tourism?
5. How do westerners deal with the ambiguity of ayahuasca shamanism?
6. What are the controversies surrounding the appropriation of indigenous knowledge and spirituality and what can the study of ayahuasca tourism contribute to this discussion?

## Research Methods

What distinguishes anthropology from other social sciences is its method of investigation. Fieldwork became a sort of “rite of passage” for the “professional” anthropologist. The belief among graduate students is that fieldwork cannot be entirely taught but they have to be experienced first hand in the field. The exact way fieldwork is conducted is a combination of two factors: the personal style of the ethnographer and the nature or specific topic of the research. The main methods I used for data collection were participant observation and interviews.

Traditionally, participant observation has implied the immersion of the ethnographer in the everyday life of the culture she is studying. This way the ethnographer participates in the social life studied as this is “virtually the only data gathering method” (Holy 1984:29). The argument in the above mentioned work is that even asking questions would impose on the subjects an attitude outside of their ordinary praxis. In fact the best way to verify if the anthropologist has a good understanding of the culture she is studying is to pass as a member of the culture. However, the concept has been criticized as the term participant observation inadvertently privileges the visual (Skultans 2007) and becomes problematic when applied to “observing” such practices as ayahuasca rituals that take place for the most part in the dark. In such cases other senses become more useful, empathy becomes central and the anthropologist ends up participating more than observing. It is true that we can never know other people’s experience, but sharing a ritual space with them and going through what they were, can facilitate the empathic process.



Empathy, despite the fact that it is rarely explicitly discussed by anthropologists, is a key term in anthropological methodology; it “is a firstperson-like perspective on another that involves an emotional, embodied, or experiential aspect” (Hollan and Throop 2008:391). But even if the anthropologist does her best in understanding others’ worldview as they see it, it is impossible to become one of them. The ethnographer has to keep a very delicate balance between empathizing with her subjects and retaining some form of objectivity. Geertz (1983) did not believe that empathy between the ethnographer and her subjects is possible. He argued that “Whatever sense we have of how things stand with someone else’s inner life, we gain it through their expressions, not through some magical intrusion into their consciousness. It’s all a matter of scratching surfaces...” (1983:73). He adds that “the ethnographer does not, and, in my opinion, largely cannot, perceive what his informants perceive. What he perceives, and that uncertainly enough, is what they perceive ‘with’ - or ‘by means of’, or ‘through’... whatever the word should be” (58).

Other anthropologists such as Kracke (1994) and Rosaldo (1989) have stressed the importance of empathy. Kracke argues that “it is through the anthropologist’s self that he comes to understand another culture” (1994:196). He describes ethnographic fieldwork as the “relationship between a person and other persons; it is a human relationship, and the anthropologist participates in it fully as a person, no matter how much he or she may try to remain aloof in a ‘researcher’s’ role” (196). Some speak of “subjective soaking”, meaning that the ethnographer abandons from the outset the idea of absolute objectivity or scientific neutrality and

attempts to merge in the culture being studied (Clammer 1984). Even though it would be a stretch to argue that I was completely successful in this, a certain degree of immersion was necessary, including my participation in ceremonies. This was a critical decision made at the beginning of my fieldwork for reasons I explain later.

In addition to ceremony participation, I also worked closely with some of the shamans in that I spent more time with them outside the ceremonies and I discussed several issues with them as well as observed the preparation of Ayahuasca. I observed ceremonies with 9 shamans, seven male and two female. I also observed one ceremony that was guided by someone who is not considered a shaman—a westerner apprenticing with a local shaman. Two of the above mentioned shamans were foreigners and one was from the coast but has apprenticed in Tarapoto, a small jungle town in a different area of Peru. The rest were mestizos who live in Iquitos.

At this point I need to make a clarification about terminology. I use the word shaman throughout the dissertation, even though it is not the traditional word for this type of practitioner in the area. However, it is the word that almost everyone would use in Iquitos within the context of shamanic tourism, even though some older shamans would find it very funny when tourists called them “shamans”. The most appropriate term would be *ayahuasquero*, which denotes a healer who specializes in ayahuasca ceremonies. Another word often used is *curandero*, which literally means a healer, but implies utilizing a wider range of healing techniques. In Iquitos the word *curandero* is used to denote someone who can heal using plants or other methods. It is not necessarily someone who leads ayahuasca ceremonies even though

sometimes they do. In several discussions with locals they stressed the fact that a certain person who did ceremonies was not a curandero and that a curandero is someone who can heal a wide range of conditions, using a variety of plants.

There are different types of ayahuasqueros in the area, such as *paleros*, who specialize in working with tree barks as well as ayahuasca. These are not to be confused with Afro-Cuban paleros. Ayahuasqueros are considered the weakest practitioners by the other specialists. All other specialists require a much more rigorous training and thus are harder to find. I only had the opportunity to work with ayahuasqueros and ayahuasqueros paleros. All of the healers I worked with, apart from the westerners, were mestizos, meaning of mixed descent usually European with Amerindian. Mestizo is also used to denote an acculturated Indian who speaks Spanish.

I did not work for the same amount of time with each of the shamans and did not observe everyone making the ayahuasca brew, even though I did ask them about the process and ingredients they use. The reason for not observing the preparation in some cases was that some did not want to reveal exactly how they made the brew—it is actually very common for shamans to be very protective of their knowledge. In a couple of cases the reason was that they did not make their own ayahuasca brew, but bought it from another shaman. This was the case of an old shaman and his apprentice living a small house in Iquitos that did not have the space or the capacity to prepare the ayahuasca, but bought it from someone they trusted. I did not tape all ceremonies—as this would create an unmanageable amount of data—but tried to at

least tape three from each shaman to make sure that I would have enough data to compare. The result is almost 78 hours of taped ceremonies. I did record written notes after each of the ceremonies and interviews.

I interviewed around 82 tourists but had conversations that I took notes on with several others. The interviews were informal and I used an open-ended basic questionnaire. Most interviews were conducted in my apartment in downtown Iquitos. I would usually make lunch to compensate people for their time. The first few questions of the interview were general biographic questions (name, age, nationality, religion, profession). The next questions were about their experiences with other drugs and their first contact with ayahuasca. The next part of the interview was about their experiences with ayahuasca and their reflections on them. I also asked them whether they were helped in any way by ayahuasca and whether they intended to take it again. I asked them to compare ayahuasca to other hallucinogens that they had taken and to sum up what it meant to them personally. Another set of questions was about the shamans they had taken it with. If they had preferences and what their impressions and expectations of them were. As I indicated, the interviews were informal and the question sequence was not always the same. Also depending on the experience of the consultant and the direction the discussion was taking I would adapt the questions accordingly. The interviews with the tourists were mostly done in English, but some were done in Spanish and a couple in German. I always used the language in which the interviewee could express themselves in the best.

The interviews with the shamans were conducted in Spanish—with the

exception of one Western shaman. Shamans were paid for the ceremonies attended the standard fee that they charged all Western participants. The exception was one shaman, whom I spent two months with in a jungle location. I paid this person a reduced price we agreed on since I could not afford the tourist price. However I did try to make up for that by making gifts and other favors such as translating on several occasions.

Even though I strived for clarity during interviews and discussions with subjects sometimes it was hard for them to explain things in more explicit terms and some of the time they did not really care to do so. They considered certain things taken for granted and some were bothered by my requests for further clarification. Even after all the experience I had with ayahuasca, I often found the way participants verbalized their experiences rather cryptic. At first I thought it was because they were deliberately keeping things from outsiders. Later I realized that when dealing with things that are largely ineffable and highly subjective, people develop a more intuitive way of communication based on their common or similar experiences. This is why empathy is important in this type of research. I try to be as clear as possible about how I come to certain assumptions and I include quotes that best represent the point I make.

I also spent two ten day periods at tourist lodges with groups of tourists mostly from the United States and Europe, who had come to Peru specifically to participate in Ayahuasca ceremonies with specific shamans. In one case the shaman was not from the area, therefore the lodge was chosen as a quiet place for this trip.

This was a rare experience and I was not able to repeat because of the cost and the rarity of groups like this. However, I was able to participate in another retreat like this at a local lodge specializing in ayahuasca tourism that has a regular flow of tourists. During the time I was there twenty people participated in the retreat and they all came from different countries and backgrounds.

Toward the end of my fieldwork I became familiar with an online forum on ayahuasca and decided to use information from the discussions there, which are public. I also published a questionnaire but the response was not very good—only seven people responded.

When dealing with a study of a hallucinogen one of the first questions I was asked was whether I intended to participate in the ceremonies. I was not sure of the answer myself until I entered the field and I realized that it was the best course of action given the circumstances. The difference between my study and some of the classic anthropological studies is that I participated in most of the rituals I observed. This was done for a few reasons. I did this in order to establish rapport with the shamans as well as participants and interviewees. Shamans have a hard time trusting people who just sit in ceremony recording and taking notes of things. They do not think very highly of people who are not willing to partake of what they are doing and they have at times spoken badly of previous researchers with which they have worked before; they would criticize them either because they did not participate in the ceremonies, or because even after participating they did not have any visions, which to them showed a limited understanding of the nature of the shaman's work.

Thus, it was important for me to gain their trust in order to gain the insider's perspective. My participation in ayahuasca ceremonies indicated courage to some shamans and often they commented that they talked to me because my interest was serious and not superficial. Also it helped that at least during the ceremony they saw me just like another patient, felt more comfortable and acted naturally. The less I behaved like an anthropologist the more likely it was to get some honest reactions and answers from the shamans as well as the participants.

I also have to add that participating in the ceremonies did not decrease the quality of the data. Because of the way ceremonies are conducted in this context (in complete darkness) it is virtually impossible to take notes during the ceremony. In all cases I had to record my notes after the ceremony. However, I was able to record ceremonies and take more detailed notes of some of the ceremonies based on the recordings.

Many of the scholars that have written about shamanism have not partaken in the rituals—have not tried the plants themselves—and therefore have little to report on the experience itself. Most of the first researchers had limited interest in doing this and few admitted the possible setbacks of this approach. Dobkin de Rios says that until she took ayahuasca after some months into her fieldwork, she “felt entirely like an objective observer who was at best only able to record the vaguest outlines of a phenomenon which defies description” (1972:8).

While the ethnographer's experience might be of little interest in a scientific study coming from a social constructionist perspective, it was essential for me to

acquire sufficient experience in order to conduct successful interviews. The main reason for this was that I was interviewing primarily westerners with whom I could identify to some degree because of the similar cultural background. In addition, even though ayahuasca in Peru is completely legal and was actually recently declared part of Peru's cultural heritage<sup>10</sup>, because of the shady legal status of ayahuasca in the United States and Europe, it would be much harder for some of the participants to trust me if I had not partaken in the ceremonies. Also because many of the interviews would revolve around rather personal issues, it was of essence to share some of my own experiences with interviewees in order to build rapport. In addition the fact that I had shared ceremonies with some of the interviewees added a sense of comfort and trust, since participating in an ayahuasca ceremony is considered to bring people closer. In a sense it fostered empathy between myself and my consultants and gave me a small window to their minds and emotions.

Most importantly, gradually I became able to identify with my consultants when they shared some of their insights on the ayahuasca experience. It has been argued that the fieldwork experience is one that modifies the ethnographer's values and codes as she tries to see things through the eyes of the people under study (Ellen 1984). The same is true for experiences involving powerful hallucinogens so this fieldwork project had this effect in more ways than expected. At the very least after a certain point I was forced to take my consultants' beliefs in spirits and their descriptions of relations with spirit persons seriously, in the same way that

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<sup>10</sup> See Appendix 5.



Willerslev (2007) suggests “taking animism seriously”.

### **Daily routine in the field**

My days in the field were not as productive as we are used to in the West. Because so much of my work depended on other people’s time and willingness there was no set schedule for every day. Especially the first two months in the field I did very little data collection. Most of the time was spent networking and gaining people’s trust as well as familiarizing myself with life in Iquitos. Throughout my fieldwork there were periods of low or no activity but they were balanced by periods of intense fieldwork that lasted anywhere from two weeks to a couple of months.

The factor of the extremely high temperatures limited the amount of work I did with people during the day. Between the hours of 11:00 a.m. and 5:00 p.m. there is little going on in Iquitos. Most stores are closed and people are difficult to get by or keep appointments. I would spend my day until the afternoon reading, writing notes or doing chores. Some days I would have meetings with shamans or other people throughout the day but most of the time they would be in the afternoon or evening.

I met most shamans after recommendations of people who lived in Iquitos or westerners who were there for a long time and had experience with local shamans. Usually I was introduced to the shamans by someone that already knew them; this helped establishing a relationship with them. I usually met tourists at the places which they frequent—the bars and restaurants in downtown Iquitos. I befriended some

of the owners and they would introduce me to tourists that were interested in ayahuasca. This way I made arrangements with some of them for interviews.

It was not easy to get interviews with most of the tourists. Most of them would only spend a limited amount of time in Iquitos and during that time they tried to rest or do sightseeing around Iquitos. Therefore it was difficult to catch them at a time that they would be willing to give an interview. Another challenge was that, especially with people from the United States, they were not willing to participate in a study in which the consumption of a drug would be mentioned. The fact that I asked them to sign an informed consent form made them uncomfortable because in a way it provided a written record that they participated in ayahuasca ceremonies. Had I the chance to do this again, I would ask the IRB for permission to obtain verbal consent to protect the interviewees' privacy. Some of the participants were quite suspicious about what would be done with the information they gave me even though I assured them that they would remain anonymous. The fact that some of the experiences that they shared were quite personal and could identify them, also made it difficult to open up to a stranger. I did not have this problem with the shamans who usually wanted their work to be known and were not concerned with privacy. So the combination of the short amount of time that I spent with the tourists as well as the sensitive nature of the research made it extra difficult to get interviews and sometimes the quality would not be as good as expected.

In addition, the fact that ayahuasca experiences cannot be easily shared verbally decreased the chances of getting the best information through an interview.

Some of the interviewees were more eloquent than others, while some had not given much thought to what they were doing so it was difficult to get to the bottom of things in such a short time. Sometimes the best reflections would come over beer in the late evening and not during an interview. Motivation of consultants in participating in anthropological research can also affect outcomes. They might have an agenda in helping the ethnographer or expect that their participation will have at least a long term benefit for them or the group they belong to. For example shamans might have expected to be represented a certain way in the product of the research. However, for the most part westerners were not very amiable to the idea of an anthropologist doing this kind of research. This might have to do with the way anthropology is perceived by the general public. However, I do not mean to give the impression that fieldwork consisted only of challenges. It was often very rewarding as well and long lasting friendships have resulted from it.

All ceremonies took place in the evening and lasted well into the night. Ceremonies in the city usually take place on Tuesdays and Fridays but that has changed to adapt to tourists' itineraries. Depending on where the ceremony was, some times I would return to my apartment on the following day. If the ceremony was outside of Iquitos I would spend the night there and return in the morning. Usually the day after a ceremony was spent recording field notes.

### **Data analysis**

My raw data consisted of field notes of daily encounters, rituals and

conversations and recorded rituals as well as interviews. The recordings were digitized and I transcribed them using transcription software. I organized them chronologically in a simple database that allowed me to keep track of the data and perform quick searches if needed.

Some of the major themes I focus on in this dissertation, such as healing, were clearly part of this dissertation from the beginning of my fieldwork. In this manner I was able to pay special attention and isolate any data that was related to healing while collecting and organizing it. Other themes emerged in much later phases of the fieldwork process. One notable example is sorcery. In this case, once I decided that sorcery would be part of this dissertation, I was able to go back to my data and look for clues or instances that were relevant. Fortunately I was able to find collected data that I had not paid enough attention to before and interpret it based on my new insights. Other themes emerged when I was back home and was going through data, transcribing etc. The section on gender in part I is an example of something that jumped out at me from the data after my fieldwork was done. In all instances, I tried to keep an open mind and continue to be in a dialogue with the material even when that meant that I had to reconsider entire sections of the dissertation.

### **Dissertation Structure**

*Part I:* Ayahuasca experiences have a long history of being sought and exchanged across wide spaces and deep cultural differences. I see shamanic tourism

as the latest chapter in this long history, which I discuss in the first two chapters. I argue that this phenomenon is not something entirely new and I place it in the historical context of a long lasting interest and fascination in the West with shamanism as well as hallucinogens—an interest that is more intellectual and spiritual than recreational—is deeply enmeshed in colonial history and has changed meaning over time.

*Part II:* In this section I look at the two pillars of Amazonian shamanism, healing and sorcery, through a review of the literature as well as my own data. I stress the fact that Amazonian shamanism is inherently ambivalent, which makes its benign images in the West problematic. By sharing numerous stories from my fieldwork I hope to show how Western participants make sense of this ambivalence and begin to gain a more nuanced view of Amazonian shamanism.

*Part III:* This section centers on the notion of the transformation of the self which was central in the context of shamanic tourism. I look at shamanic apprenticeship as a transformative process for the future shaman and share the stories of some of the shamans I worked with and the importance of shamanic dietas in this process. Ritual is instrumental in the transformative process of the participants and I review a number of rituals I attended in order to illustrate this. Finally, I discuss the ways in which this self transformation was conceptualized by Western participants in ayahuasca ceremonies.

## PART I: The Western Vision Quest

*Ethnographic vignette 1: It's the summer of 2002 and my first day in Iquitos with my husband. We happen to have arrived on a general strike day and the streets are deserted and all shops are closed. We walk around the downtown area hoping to find something to eat. As we are walking along the promenade a local man approaches us and offers us a brochure for a remote jungle lodge. He says it's the furthest one from Iquitos and we are in for a real authentic jungle experience. We are not interested in ecotourism so I try to politely decline. As I glance at the brochure, I see the word ayahuasca. This feels like a godsend. I came here to investigate if Iquitos would be a good spot for studying ayahuasca tourism and the first person we meet happens to have information on it! I ask him more about the ayahuasca ceremonies and while he is talking I notice the name of the shaman does not look Peruvian at all. I ask him about this man. He says he is an American shaman and he can actually arrange for us to meet him so he can tell us all about ayahuasca. I have to admit that the "shaman's" nationality puts me off and try to get out of this. But the man insists and within 15 minutes he has brought us to the shaman and we are all sitting in a café where he tells us his story.*

*Ethnographic vignette 2: It's 2003 and I have just arrived at the airport of Iquitos to begin my fieldwork. As I walk out of the luggage claim area I am confronted with at least a dozen taxi drivers who try to convince me to go with them.*

*Most are really pushy so I opt for a younger man who seems to be quieter. During the ride to the town he asks me questions about why I am visiting Iquitos. I tell him that I will be researching ayahuasca shamanism. He seems very excited and starts telling me all about this shaman that he has taken ayahuasca with. He and other people he knows have been in ceremony with him. He tells me about the visions he had with him. The shaman's name is French.*

One of the major questions that guided my research was “What are the motives of westerners who pursue ayahuasca experiences?”. To answer this question I had to, just like them, travel to the remote and relatively isolated town of Iquitos in the Peruvian jungle. I went to the Amazon looking for what most tourists are looking for: authentic shamans. Ironically, my first encounters were with Western shamans and this was an early lesson in the forces of globalization. Ayahuasca tourism, or as I like to call it *shamanic tourism* is a relatively new phenomenon, and has escalated in the last few decades. However, the Western fascination with shamanism and psychoactive plants and substances and the changes in consciousness that they produce is not new at all, but is deeply rooted in Western intellectual tradition. I will show that the Western interest in ayahuasca is a continuation of this long history and belongs to its latest chapter that has been called “psychedelic renaissance” (Cloud 2007, Joy 1992, Kotler 2010), dominated by the themes of healing, self-transformation and the sacramental use of hallucinogens. This transformation of the subject is facilitated by contact with the radically other, the pre-modern, spiritual, traditional and sacred.

## Chapter 1: Shamanism and the Western imagination

Shamanism has fascinated Western imagination at least since the 18<sup>th</sup> century (Flaherty 1992: 97-98). Endless pages have been written trying to interpret this complex phenomenon. Many early scholarly approaches as well as contemporary popular approaches seem unsatisfactory because they view shamanism through a particular lens, for example they might view it as a pathological condition. Since there are certain parallels between the ways the *shaman* and the *noble* (or ignoble) *savage* were constructed in the West, in this section I will take a look at several interpretations of shamanism and place the phenomenon of shamanic tourism in the historical continuum of this long standing and often contradictory relationship with shamanism. It will be clear that looking at these interpretations reveals more about the interpreters than about shamanism itself. Admittedly and as several scholars have pointed out the West has had and continues to have an ambivalent relationship with shamanism. Many anthropologists would agree that the term shaman is problematic and many consider it a “desiccated” “made-up, Western category” (Taussig 1987 and 1989, Geertz 1966, Spencer 1968).

Works like those of Castaneda, which have been accused of being fraudulent, have shaken the credibility in this area of study. Castaneda’s work was heavily criticized and exposed as a hoax by de Mille (1976), a special session was organized at the American Anthropological Association 1978 meeting to address the issue of “Fraud and Publishing Ethics” (Geertz 2004), and an entire volume of papers was published (de Mille 1980). However, many of today’s spiritual seekers either have



no knowledge of the controversy, or when they do, they argue that this does not take the value away from Castaneda's teachings. Even though the experiential approach that Castaneda proposed is becoming increasingly popular in academia, the fact that his account was fictional has tainted the field forever.

### **Generic Shamanism**

Earlier literature on shamanism such as Eliade (1964) or Lewis (1971) was concerned with generalizing and creating an all-purpose model of shamanism—a universal model. Even some anthropologists like Barbara Myerhoff (1976) looked for universal patterns among spiritual practitioners. She considered shamanism to be a transcendental phenomenon unrelated to socio-economic circumstance (Znamenski 2007). This study departs from this early framework and is concerned with the specific context—in this case Iquitos; I look at how, depending on context and the agents involved, the way shamanism and ayahuasca in particular are viewed changes. Its appropriation by Western agents has not only changed the global discourse around shamanism but also the local one. While the interest of scholars has shifted to context-specific studies of shamanism (e.g. Thomas and Humphrey 1994), the general direction of the public is to embrace ayahuasca and Amazonian shamanism in the framework of a universal spirituality not attached to a particular cultural context.

The word shaman comes from the Tunguz word *saman* (Eliade 1964). The word entered the European vocabulary in the 18<sup>th</sup> century from travelers and

explorers in Siberia who were mostly Dutch or German native speakers (Laufer 1917, Flaherty 1992). Even though shamans are not the only religious figures in their societies according to Eliade the shaman alone is the “great master of ecstasy” (1964). In fact, because of Eliade’s work shamanism even today is closely associated with Altered States of Consciousness (ASCs) even though some have challenged the usefulness of terms like trance and ecstasy as analytical tools when it comes to discussing shamanism (Hamayon 1993, 1998). According to Casanowicz (1926) the tunguz word means one who is ‘excited’, ‘moved’, or ‘raised’. Hoppál (1987) adds that another translation of the word *saman* is “inner heat” and it comes from the Sanskrit word *saman* that means song. The word has been widely discussed and contested as being an inappropriate word for defining such a wide spectrum of traditional healing practitioners to the point that most anthropologists today prefer to speak of *shamanisms* (Atkinson 1992) and others argue that because the use of the term has changed so much over time it is impossible to arrive at an agreed upon operational definition (Jones 2006). Most definitions are either general and universal or context specific. In indigenous languages there is a specific word assigned to healers usually related to some important aspect of that culture’s healing complex. Atkinson has brought attention to the diverse approaches and theories on shamanism and warns of generalizing theories that might lead to “unwarranted reductionism and romantic exoticizing of a homogeneous non-Western “other”” (1992:309).

Eliade points out that not every ecstatic is a shaman; “the shaman specializes in the trance state, during which his soul is believed to leave his body and to ascend

to the sky or descend to the underworld” (1964:202). As Wallis (2003) stresses though, not all shamans—even in Siberia—have similar “journeys” and therefore according to this definition, which is widely accepted by neoshamans, many traditional shamans are not shamans at all. In addition, many scholars have discussed the role of a shaman to be one who attends to the psychological and spiritual needs of a community that has granted that practitioner privileged status. If we adopt this definition, then healers in the urban context of Iquitos who work with tourists can hardly be called shamans. Yet, modern practitioners have adopted the term shaman for themselves.

Michael Harner in his widely read book *The Way of the Shaman*, describes a *shaman* as “a man or a woman who enters an altered state of consciousness—at will—to contact and utilize an ordinarily hidden reality in order to acquire knowledge, power, and to help other persons” (1980:25). He describes them as “keepers of a remarkable body of ancient techniques that they use to achieve and maintain well-being and healing for themselves and members of their communities” (1980:xiii). This and similar definitions of shamanism seem to be popular among spiritual seekers. However, others depart from definitions that focus on the trance and healing aspects of shamanism and like Jakobsen (1999) challenge Eliade’s definition and stress the ambivalence of shamans<sup>11</sup>.

The problem with most shamanism-related literature is that shamanism has been traditionally presented out of context. This started with Eliade who “turned the

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<sup>11</sup> This will be extensively discussed in chapter 4.

inspirational religious practices of north Asia into a timeless mystery” (Humphrey 1994:191). He popularized an ideal type of Siberian Shamanism and his model was adopted later by others as a point of comparison for other regions as well. In addition, Eliade argued that the shamanism found in Siberia was a sort of “pure” and “primordial” religious phenomenon, not to be found anywhere in the world (1964:11). Castaneda also perpetuated this by stressing that shamanism and sorcery did not have any borders (Znamenski 2007). He wrote that his conclusion was that “sorcery does not have a cultural focus” (De Mille 1976:71).

This tendency to universalize shamanism is very much with us today, anthropology being the only discipline that insists on the importance of the cultural context of such practices. Even I, as a college student was attracted to this universal appeal of shamanism that I found in Eliade’s work. However, the more I deepened my studies the more this approach seemed unsatisfactory. Not only was I fascinated by the historical evolution of the concept of shamanism while exploring the literature but I was confronted with a real dilemma when I started my fieldwork in Iquitos. The shamans I worked with bore no resemblance to the timeless bearers of universal knowledge that I encountered in Eliade’s work as a college student. I either had to reject them as fakes or charlatans or treat them as what they were: not archetypes, but real people operating in a particular socio-cultural context. Thomas and Humphrey are among the scholars who “historicize shamanic activities by understanding the particular manifestations as results of historical processes” (1994:4). My work should contribute to this effort.

### **Irrational and vilified Shamanism**

A historical overview of Western reactions to shamanism reveals certain patterns that are important to point out if we are to show the evolution of the concept. The first reports of travelers on shamanism were sensationalistic and contributed to a view of the shamanistic phenomena as representative of the irrationality of the non-Western other or emphasized its fraudulent nature. However, as priorities and attitudes shifted in the West, the concept became associated with spirituality, healing, closeness to nature and an array of attractive and desirable attributes. Both the original dismissal of shamanism and its reverence today are stereotypes and do not take into account the complexity of lived experience. Wernitznig (2003) discusses two discourses in relation to indigenous people and knowledge; the Good Indian and the Bad Indian or otherwise known as the *noble* and the *ignoble savage*. He identifies two historical traditions that gave birth to the above discourses. Classical thought emphasized the idyllic state of simplicity and integrity while the Judeo-Christian thought focused more on bestial and devilish interpretations of the primitive. In both discourses the savage is perceived in opposition to the civilized West and both are equally one-dimensional and static. They view the “other” as frozen in time and are reinforcing stereotypes and prejudices. Within the discourse of the Good Indian we find the stereotype of the Indian as keeper of the earth, a very familiar image in the 20<sup>th</sup> c.

Hamayon (1998) suggests three trends in the history of the approaches to

shamanic behavior; devilization, medicalization and idealization. She places the first one historically in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> c. During that time, shamans were seen in opposition to Christianity and as “taken” by the evil spirits. Duerr (1978) suggests that this happened with other ASCs too because it served Christianity better to attribute phenomena like witchcraft (which was also associated with the use of hallucinogens) to the devil instead of attributing them simply to plants. This way by devilizing the other, conversion to Christianity was easier. Early chroniclers were Christian clergy who described shamans as “ministers of the devil” (Narby and Huxley 2001). Gonzalo Fernandez de Oviedo described “revered” old men, held in “high esteem,” who used tobacco in order to “worship the Devil” (Narby and Huxley 2001:11-12). The French priest, Andre Thevet described a group of “venerable” Brazilian practitioners called the *paje*, and referred to them as “witches” who “adore the Devil” (Narby and Huxley 2001:13, 15). French priest, Antoine Biet, recounted that one does not acquire the “power of curing illness,” unless they become “true penitents of the Demon” (Narby and Huxley 2001:16-17). Seventeenth c. Russian clergyman, Avvakum Petrovich, described one Siberian shaman as “a villain” (Narby and Huxley 2001:18) who called upon demons.

During the Enlightenment, primitivist ideas were used in order to educate with no intention to encourage people to appropriate savage ways of living (Wernitznig 2003). Their intention was to use them as a commentary on the civilized society’s malaise. During that time, we see a split in the ways shamans were described. One approach presented them as “charlatans,” “imposters,” and

“magicians.” For example Diderot, the first writer to define “shaman” and the chief editor of the *Encyclopedie*, referred to shamans as Siberian “imposters” who perform “tricks that seem supernatural to an ignorant and superstitious people” (Narby and Huxley 2001:32). He remarked that shamans “persuade the majority of people that they have ecstatic transports, in which the genies reveal the future and hidden things to them”. Despite their trickery, Diderot admitted that the supernatural might play a part (34).

A similar report by Johann Gmelin, an 18<sup>th</sup> century German explorer of Siberia, describes shamanic ceremonies as marked by “humbug,” “hocus-pocus,” “conjuring tricks,” and “infernal racket” (Narby and Huxley 2001:27-28). The Russian botanist Stepan Krasheninnikov, reported that the beliefs of the natives of eastern Siberia were “absurd” and “ridiculous” (Narby and Huxley 2001:29). He wrote that shamans were “cleverer, more adroit and shrewder than the rest of the people” (30), and described one shaman who “plunged a knife in his belly” but performed the trick “so crudely” that “one could see him slide the knife along his stomach and pretend to stab himself, then squeeze a bladder to make blood come out” (30). As Bernand and Gruzinski note, according to the missionaries of the 16<sup>th</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup> centuries shamans were manipulators and were considered a menace (Chaumeil 1999).

Flaherty, however, noted that Europe in the 18<sup>th</sup> century was not entirely preoccupied with rationalism, humanism, and scientific determinism; manifestations of romanticism and the occult were present as well (1992:7).

### **Medicalized Shamanism**

The second trend was “medicalization” and is associated with the 19<sup>th</sup> c. and colonialism (Chaumeil 1999). It is the approach that focuses on the psychopathological aspect of shamanic behavior and its therapeutic aspect. This view was influenced by psychoanalysis. This approach has been abandoned and healing is no longer seen as the basis of shamanism. In addition it has been argued that sometimes healing appears to be a mask put on traditional customs in order to be tolerated by colonial and modernizing powers (Hamayon 1998).

According to psychoanalytical approaches shamanic behavior has been characterized as schizophrenia, something, which for many is oversimplifying his condition and role (Krippner 1992, 2000). The first scholarly literature on shamanism underlined the similarities of the shamanic trance to pathological states in our culture. For example, it has been defined as a dissociative condition (Penguin Dictionary of Psychology 1961:297). In earlier psychological literature dissociation was seen as pathological, but later this bias has been lifted and authors such as Bourguignon (1968) have pointed out its healing aspects (Peters and Price-Williams 1980:402).

Eliade (1964), Kroeber (1952), La Barre (1970), Devereux (1961), Wallace (1966), Silverman (1967), Loeb (1929) and Radin (1937) have all in one way or another defined the shamanic state as pathological. Noll (1983) successfully argues against this by comparing certain aspects of the shamanic state of consciousness and



schizophrenia. Peters and Price-Williams (1980) by comparing trance states from 42 cultures concluded that shamans' "trance states during ritual performances are not in themselves pathological", and "shamans as a group cannot be considered of one personality type" (1980:407). Others have stressed the therapeutic aspects of shamanism (Ackerknecht 1943, Eliade 1964).

Campbell (1979:195-203) characterizes all ASCs as schizophrenia and the experience itself as figment of the imagination. He approaches schizophrenia and the shamanic journey in the same way, suggesting that schizophrenia is just an inward journey having common elements with the shamanic journey such as separation, initiation and return. For him there is no doubt that shamanism is pathological, the difference is that other cultures tolerate it and make the experience beneficial, while our rational culture rejects it as abnormal, a view echoed by Silverman (1967). R.D. Laing (1979:184-186), along the same lines, parallels transcendental experiences with madness. He supports the existence of an external and an internal world and argues that what shamans and madmen have in common is the contact with the inner world. As Devereux (1961) notes, from the point of view of the psychiatrist shamans are heavy neurotic persons or psychotics in a state of remission. Bastide (1972) counters that trance is a social phenomenon common in certain cultures and not an individual sickness.

A number of authors have argued that the way ASCs are viewed is culturally constructed, and pointed out a great difference between shamans and schizophrenics is that the former are institutionally supported when in this condition while in

modern societies schizophrenics are considered to be outsiders (Drury 1989). In fact in shamanic societies there is a distinction between people who are actual shamans and those who are sick or crazy (Rätsch 1989:26). It has been noted that in many societies there are Gods associated with ASCs (and the plants that induce them are considered sacred) a fact, which attributes them with healing or spiritual powers, which are considered desired features. Another difference between the two is that shamans learn how to balance between different levels of consciousness, imposing order over chaos, and are not victims of their condition. Recent research has also revealed no correlation between shamans and mental disease. Shamans performed equally well or better to non-shamans in psychological tests (Boyer et al. 1964). Ripinsky-Naxon concluded, "The world of a mentally dysfunctional individual is disintegrated. On the other hand, just the opposite may be said about a shaman" (1993:104).

Other scholars, Lévi-Strauss being one of them, have paralleled shamans' role to the role of psychiatrists in Western societies. He acknowledges that shamans have some empirical knowledge, which they use to heal, but they are basically able to heal cases that are clearly psychosomatic in the Western terminology. Therefore they heal the same illnesses that psychiatrists do. Lévi-Strauss also makes a distinction between normal and "pathological" thought. He suggests that while normal thought continually strives to understand the universe, pathological thought overflows with emotional interpretations and overtones, in order to supplement an otherwise deficient reality. These two ways complement each other and in the case

of shamans when “normal thought cannot fathom the problem of illness, the group calls upon the neurotic to furnish a wealth of emotion heretofore lacking a focus” (1963:181). Lévi-Strauss is one scholar among many that also views shamans as psychotics who use their condition to cure others. From this discourse the image of the shaman as *wounded healer* was born: “But the primitive magician, the medicine man, or the shaman is not only a sick man; he is, above all, a sick man who has been cured, who has succeeded in curing himself” (Eliade 1964:27).

It seems that the approaches that medicalize shamanism perceive it as inferior either because it is savage or pathological, even when this pathology is viewed in a positive light.

### **Idealized Shamanism**

Hamayon (1998) calls the third trend in approaches to shamanism, “idealization” of shamanism. This trend can be traced historically to the 19<sup>th</sup> c. but has reached a peak in the 20<sup>th</sup> c. We can find traces of this approach in European romanticism, with its attraction to the spiritual and the mysterious, as well as in American transcendentalism and the works of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, both of which had a similar “organic approach to nature and spirituality” (Znamenski 2007:24). Echoing this romantic perpetuation of the nature–culture dichotomy and inspired by anti-modernist sentiments, shamanism is viewed as the most *archaic* religious form and is “praised as representative of a genuinely *natural* philosophy particularly useful in our modern technocratic world. Primitive is

turned into primordial, wild into ecological, magic into mystic, makeshift into artistic” (Hamayon 2001:3). In fact this nostalgia about the past and hopeful idealism about the future seems to be a common theme of modernity. This approach brings to mind what Rosaldo called imperialist nostalgia (1989), the sort of nostalgia that people feel after conquering people. As he pointedly argued, this nostalgia is not innocent.

In trying to explain why Western scholars, including anthropologists, have failed to interpret shamanism without avoiding imposing Western cultural categories on it, several scholars imply the inherent incompatibility of shamanism and Western science. “In contrast to cultures characterized by an ethos based on the shamanic or meditative technologies, the dominant cultural ethos of Indo-European societies generally ignores these forms of consciousness or subjects those who seek them to pathologization, social marginalization, or persecution” (Winkelman 2000:116). Some scholars argue that the problem is that even though Western societies consume substances that affect consciousness, they lack legitimate institutionalized procedures of accessing ASCs.

Western culture is seen as having excluded the intuitive perceptual mode from definitions of consciousness (Wautischier 1989) and shamanism is perceived as a gateway to such modalities. According to a lot of the literature on neoshamanism<sup>12</sup>, the problem lies in the fundamental difference between the Western worldview based

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<sup>12</sup> Neoshamanism, sometimes called New Shamanism, refers to the revived forms of shamanism in the West. Jakobsen (1999: xi) defines it as “a form of shamanism that has been created at the end of this century to re-establish a link for modern man to his spiritual roots, to re-introduce shamanic behavior into the lives of westerners in search of spirituality and, thereby, renew contact with Nature”.

on the scientific model of organizing the world, as opposed to the “irrationality” of shamanic thought and practice. In other words it is perceived as a conflict between two different paradigms. It is often argued that the traditions of European peoples and their New World descendants have tended to depreciate ASCs in their emphasis on rational thought.

In the 1960s, several countercultures identified with the image of the noble savage as an alternative to civilization and indigenous peoples were imagined in some kind of idyllic harmony with nature (Ellen 1986). For the first time we see the use of psychedelics for spiritual and not recreational purposes, something that will be discussed in the next chapter. Shamanism was approached as a form of spirituality and a source of creativity for westerners. During this time Carl Gustav Jung became popular partly because of his anti-modern message, and partly because he opened the door to the recognition of the role of the sacred and the spiritual. At this time, we see the appearance of shamanism in the mainstream and Eliade’s and Castaneda’s work play a fundamental role in this. It has been argued that Eliade “made shamanism go global” (Znamenski 2007:180).

As already discussed, Eliade contributed to the idealization of shamanism with his phenomenological approach, studying shamanism in its own terms without “reducing” it to social life, history, economics or brain function. He approached shamanism as archaic spirituality and looked for universal ideas, symbols and metaphors like the *axis mundi* (1964). He stressed that the shamanic universe consisted of three levels, the universality of which has been debated by other

scholars. Both Eliade and Jung were interested in identifying cross-cultural archetypes of spirituality and both believed that westerners could restore harmony by learning from the non-Western “other”. Several scholars, including some anthropologists, followed in their footsteps. Furst (1977) agreed that shamanism was the oldest form of religion and the foundation for all other religions. Myerhoff (1976) also lamented the spiritual poverty of the Western world and the fact that Western society did not have shamans.

During the 1980s and later, we see an emphasis on the image of the *spiritual* noble savage, showing inner harmony (with oneself) and outer harmony (with the environment) (Wernitznig 2003). The stereotype of the wise, prophetic Indian became very popular during that time and is still with us today. The environmentalist movement found in indigenous knowledge the potential remedies for civilization’s problems. During this time, neoshamanisms abound and Eliade is considered responsible for inspiring the emergence of neoshamanisms in the West. Neoshamanisms claim a strong concern for ecology and everything that is considered to be “natural”.

At this time the anthropologist Michael Harner (1980) introduces his method of Core Shamanism, a self-reliant system which is purposely culture-free so as to be more easily adapted by westerners to their own use. He founded the Foundation for Shamanic Studies (FSS) in 1979 and has been training westerners in shamanic techniques since then. The Foundation is also working in restoring local shamanisms worldwide. This is possible because “core shamanism can be transplanted into any

cultural setting as a skeleton around which a person can build his or her own spirituality” (Znamenski 2007:242). This also fits very well with Western individualism.

### **Neoshamanism and the New Age**

One of the most recent chapters in this history is the phenomenon of neoshamanism and the appropriation of indigenous spirituality by loosely defined movements such as the New Age. Neoshamanism is defined as “a form of shamanism that has been created at the end of the 20th c. to re-establish a link for modern man to his spiritual roots, to re-introduce shamanic behavior into the lives of westerners in search of spirituality and, thereby, renew contact with nature” (Jakobsen 1999:xi).

Even though there are similarities between shamanic tourism and the New Age, it is hard to contextualize shamanic tourism as part of the New Age because there are glaring differences between the two. New Age has a negative image not only among academics but among the general public as well. Various Western shamans as well as consultants in my study are quick to point out that they are not part of the New Age movement and have expressed contempt for the New Age and commercialism of spirituality. They have also expressed discomfort at the profit that certain people make from spirituality. Most scholars agree that because of the negative connotations of New Age the label was dropped and it is almost impossible to find anyone who would identify with it. But self-labeling is not the only reason I

hesitate to declare shamanic tourism a part of the New Age.

It is not easy to find a definition of New Age but it has been defined as a “search for the primal experience of transformation” (Melton et al. 1990:xiii). Basil (1988) traces its genesis back to the 1920s, with deep roots in the Western occult and metaphysical tradition, such as the Theosophical Society. But for some the current New Age movement also has roots in some of the of the 1960s countercultures. Others trace its roots as far back as the mystical Neo-Platonism of the Hellenistic world (Ellwood 1992). Brown (1992) says that New Age goes back to the 17<sup>th</sup> c., but it is a manifestation of a change in American Character that began in the 1960s and involved a shift from a social view of the self to a psychological one. This has later evolved to a spiritual view of the self. Melton and Lewis (1992) trace the beginnings of the New Age in the 1970s and point out that its interests have shifted over the decades. In the 1970s there was a prominence of Eastern spiritual teachers, in the 1980s of channeled entities, and in the 1990s an emphasis on shamanism and Native American spirituality.

New Age seems to comprise beliefs from different origins and is very eclectic. Prominent themes include the dissatisfaction with technocratic society, rejection of institutionalized religion, self-expression as well as moving back to nature and simpler lifestyles. It has also been noted for its “planetary significance regarding environmental destruction” (Brown 1997). The focus is more on the individual and its ability to create its own reality, as it is thought that by changing the self the world will change. However, the one feature of the New Age that most



scholars would agree on is that it lacks a core philosophy. In fact, it is highly decentralized, antiauthoritarian and personalized (Pike 2004).

With its focus on spirituality and consciousness, the New Age has been criticized for downplaying the political. Vitebsky (287) calls this “psychologizing the religious”, using the cosmos as a tool for “therapizing the psyche”. Danforth (1989:284) also argues that within the New Age social and political problems are psychological problems. Social change is equated with personal growth and self-transformation. However, this idea is not entirely “new” as I will show in the last chapter. New Age has also been criticized for seeking instant, easy, positive enlightenment (Wernitznig 2003). Others have stressed the focus on the benign aspects of shamanism by the New Age (Jakobsen 1999).

Shamanic tourism is not a unique example of appropriation of indigenous knowledge by westerners. Another example that might relate to the case of ayahuasca is the case of Tibetan Buddhism as discussed by Lopez (1998). He discusses the different and sometimes even conflicting images of Tibetan Buddhism, often considered in opposition to Western culture. Some of these highly romanticized portrayals of Tibet still continue to hold sway. Similarly to some of the portrayals of ayahuasca, Tibet is imagined to embody the spiritual and the ancient and to hold wisdom lost to westerners. According to Lopez (1998:10) “Tibet is seen as the cure for an ever-ailing Western civilization, a tonic to restore its spirit”. The same can be argued for ayahuasca as well; not only the plants, but Amazonian peoples themselves are seen as spiritual and wise, and holding the answers to our

problems. Lopez concludes that this idealization of Tibet might end up harming the cause of Tibetan independence (1998:11). Similarly, in North America many outsiders participate in sweat lodges and the Sun Dance Ritual (Znamenski 2007).

Another example is the one of the Sierra Mazateca as discussed by Feinberg (2003), an area that attracted many westerners for similar reasons that Iquitos did: to experience the exotic and divine “other” in the form of hallucinogenic mushrooms. Mushrooms symbolize the timeless natural world as well as the good Indian (2003:159) and are often viewed in opposition to drugs. Feinberg argues that in this case “mushrooms are used as part of the struggle over the definition of a legitimate way of appropriating culture” (2003:145). This discourse becomes part of a web of discourses that weave Mazatec identity (Feinberg 2003).

As the example of the Penan in the Philippines shows (Brosius 1997), outside appropriation of indigenous knowledge can impose meanings on it that may be quite imaginary. Environmentalist discourse tends to present indigenous people as a homogenous group and their knowledge as universal in order to promote conservation. But the politics of this should not be ignored since it is westerners who define concepts such as conservation and who have acquired the role of speaking on behalf of the indigenous people. Several scholars have pointed out that even positive stereotypes perpetuate erroneous and detrimental assumptions about the “other”. Kehoe (2000) has argued that New Age and neoshamanism appropriation misrepresent or dilute indigenous practices and subtly reinforce racist ideas such as

the Noble Savage image. Unfortunately, these stereotypes are still pervasive in popular culture<sup>13</sup>.

We might not be closer to understanding shamanic practices but it is certain that our understanding of it has evolved. As Narby and Huxley concluded, “Even after five hundred years of reports on shamanism, its core remains a mystery. One thing that has changed . . . however, is the gaze of the observers. It has opened up. And understanding is starting to flower” (2001:8).

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<sup>13</sup> As I write these lines, a new reality TV show called “Mark & Olly Living with the Machiguenga” perpetuates these stereotypes of the untainted Indian living in harmony with nature.

## Chapter 2: Hallucinogens and the Western tradition

An increasing number of articles in the media as well as scholarly sources reveal the increased Western interest in sacred plants. An article on ayahuasca and other popular drugs in the West was published in Newsweek in 1992; its writer reports that “a growing number of people, some seeking adventure as much as God, are visiting shamans in Latin America and the American Southwest—or even as far away as Southeast Asia” (Krajick 1992). Several internet sites devoted to mind-altering substances, which list first person accounts, cultural histories, travel opportunities and “recipes” have appeared in the last couple of decades. Among the most popular and most informative are: *Erowid*<sup>14</sup>, *The Lycaeum*<sup>15</sup>, *Entheogen.com*<sup>16</sup> and *Ayahuasca.com*<sup>17</sup> the last one is known as “Home of the Amazonian Great Medicine”. Discussion forums on networking sites, where people share their experiences with ayahuasca are another very good resource of information on “ayahuasca tourism” and seem to bring together a rather large and diverse “psychedelic community”. Residents of the United States can buy ayahuasca from various sources and some of them even grow it in their gardens. Ethnobotanist Ott (1993) stated that at in the 1990s there was at least one Banisteriopsis farm in the United States. Even though this surge for many seems to be related to the countercultural movements of the 1960s, the “romance” of the West with these substances seems to be much older and pervasive.

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<sup>14</sup> <http://www.erowid.org/>

<sup>15</sup> <http://www.lycaeum.org/>

<sup>16</sup> <http://www.entheogen.com/>

<sup>17</sup> <http://www.ayahuasca.com/>

The role of hallucinogens in human culture is considered by some to be so important that several authors have connected the origin of religion to psychedelics, among them Terence McKenna (1991, 1993) and anthropologists Weston La Barre (1970, 1972) and Peter Furst (1974, 1976, 1990[1972]). Some of the most influential books of the last decades are likely those of Terence McKenna, whose most popular book, *True Hallucinations*, is a retelling of his true journeys through Amazonia in the early 1970s, with his brother Dennis and a group of friends in search of ayahuasca. He was a very charismatic public speaker whose lectures are circulated on the internet by the members of the psychedelic community and are still considered the definitive source on hallucinogens.

### **Discussion of hallucinogens in the Western tradition**

The interest of the West in mind altering substances is by no means new. Just like with shamanism, early on artists and scholars wrote extensively about them. Artists used them as tools for self-exploration and inspiration. Romantic poets like Coleridge, Poe and Shelley investigated their dreams and trance states also using drugs with the intention to probe the far reaches of the mind (Pinchbeck 2004). There was an act of resistance to modernity and the Industrial revolution. Mind altering substances became one way to explore cultural otherness by making direct contact with “primitive” knowledge. Antonin Artaud, by participating in peyote rituals in Mexico attempted to recover the sense of the sacred that European culture had lost (Artaud 1976). Artists like the Surrealists also explored dream states

(Pinchbeck 2004).

In the 20<sup>th</sup> c. Aldus Huxley might be the first influential figure who discussed the potential benefits of hallucinogens openly. Through the psychedelic experience he wanted to achieve an overall understanding of the world and believed that psychedelics could help people with fundamental questions about life (Huxley 1954). He argued that they can provide direct access to a transcendental reality and become a tool for social change: “To be shaken out of the roots of ordinary perception, to be shown for a few timeless hours the outer and inner world, not as they appear to an animal obsessed with words and notions, but as they are apprehended, directly and unconditionally, by Mind at Large—this is an experience of inestimable value to everyone” (Huxley 1954).

Walter Benjamin also saw the pursuit of visionary experience as an extension of a rational and intellectual quest and considered consumerism responsible for the loss of ritual in the West—ritual that would facilitate “ecstatic contact with the cosmos” (Benjamin et al. 1996). He argued more or less what many still argue today, that the only way to effect social change is to change the relationship of the senses to the world, in other words change one’s perspective. Despite Western culture’s ambiguous relationship to drugs the above ideas keep returning.

### **Scientific Approaches**

In a similar pattern with shamanism, attitudes toward hallucinogens have

changed over time. Early scientific approaches<sup>18</sup> (by pharmacologists, psychologists etc.) at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, stressed the purported fact that hallucinogens induced “madness,” clinically identifiable, but perceived as having divine origin by the simpleminded community. This discourse was publicized as part of the image of the irrational or even childish “savage”. Seeking to illustrate recent chapters in this history, Yensen lays out the three major scientific paradigms about the effects of psychedelic drugs: (1) the Psychotomimetic (madness mimicking), which holds that psychedelics induce a mental state resembling psychosis; (2) the Psycholytic (psyche loosening), which holds that they alter the dynamic relationship between the conscious and the subconscious and therefore can be used in psychotherapy; and (3) the Psychedelic, which views psychedelics as facilitators of mystical experiences, which can produce “profound, lasting and positive changes in personality” (Yensen 1989:25).

The Psychotomimetic paradigm dominated research in the 1940s and limited research in this area. It suggested the existence of substances that cause schizophrenic or catatonic psychosis. Studies made with mescaline found no medical use for it. LSD was studied from 1948 on as a substance causing model psychosis. This idea affected research throughout the early 1950s, when many psychiatric researchers were hoping to understand the riddle of schizophrenia through psychotomimetics.

The Psycholytic paradigm was popular in Europe in the 1950s and in the

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<sup>18</sup> see Yensen (1989) for details.

United States in the 1960s. During this period numerous studies on the psychological effects of hallucinogens and their possible uses in psychotherapy were done.

Psycholytic therapy<sup>19</sup> is the use of LSD and similar substances in low or moderate doses with the aim of shortening and facilitating psychoanalysis. This approach focused on regression to and re-experiencing of painful childhood memories.

Experiences of mystical content were interpreted as wish fulfillment or avoidance of a traumatic experience. In the same manner experiences of primordial or archetypal nature were considered a psychotic defense to excessive drug levels. In the late 1950s researchers started to question the Psycholytic paradigm. This type of therapy used basic Freudian principles (Grof 1988:287).

The term psychedelic, which means mind-manifesting, was introduced in 1957 by Humphrey Osmond, who hoped that this new label would liberate “scientific investigation from the enduring influence of the Psychotomimetic paradigm, which offered limited field application and a definite pejorative bias” (Yensen 1989:33). When Osmond did research with alcoholics he found that patients felt psychedelics could shed light on the eternal question of the purpose and meaning of life and observed that the patients who derived greatest benefit were those that reported mystical experiences.

The interest of Western science in hallucinogens started with the discovery of LSD by Albert Hoffman in 1938. LSD was considered very promising for psychological research and was hailed as a wonder drug in the early 1960s. Scientific

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<sup>19</sup> The term was coined by Ronald A. Sandison (Grof 1988).



research with hallucinogens has gone from being very popular to being demonized and then forgotten, only to return to the foreground in the recent years. In 1962 Timothy Leary and Richard Alpert, Harvard psychologists, who conducted research with LSD had their contracts terminated; an event that produced the fascination of the popular press with the so-called Harvard Drug Scandal (Weil 1963). Leary conducted research with prisoners (Leary et al. 1963) but was heavily criticized for not following the rules of scientific investigation, by forming close personal relations with his subjects and by administering drugs without the presence of medical doctors (Rublowsky 1974:160). Most of the press exposure was misinformed and did not take into account the professional articles on the subject. The use of LSD by the general public was forbidden and all research was halted. In 1967, some exaggerated and misrepresented reports on genetic damage caused by LSD made things even more difficult for research with psychedelics. By that time hundreds of articles on research with LSD had been published.

The fact that hallucinogens create powerful religious feelings in people cross-culturally is considered unlikely to be coincidental and several researchers have looked into this problem. Winkelman (2000) suggests a “neurophenomenological” framework in order to approach ASCs. It is clear to him and an increasing number of scientists that they and other hallucinogens do not merely cause temporary “psychoses” or “mere hallucinations” in people but instead work with existing, adaptive, mechanisms in the brain for generating ASCs that can be used constructively. Such scholars do not see shamans as maladjusted, but instead as

people who use ayahuasca and similar substances in order to fulfill their roles in the community.

In a more recent development, non-profit organizations such as MAPS<sup>20</sup> and the Heffter Research Institute<sup>21</sup> exemplify a future-oriented application of this psychologically informed tradition. Both fund the clinical study of hallucinogenic drugs both in the United States and other countries, such as Switzerland. Heffter was founded in New Mexico in 1993 as a non-profit organization in the belief that such research was not only viable but also critically important. One of the most known research projects funded by Heffter, which was just completed, is the psilocybin study with cancer patients directed by Dr. Charles Grob (Dobkin de Rios and Grob 2007).

During the last decade several small studies have shown that hallucinogens such as ketamine and psilocybin can be beneficial in treating mental illness, including depression, obsessive compulsive disorders and anxiety (Cloud 2007). Even more recently, rigorous research conducted at Johns Hopkins University has revived the interest in the potential uses of hallucinogens, in this case their use in relieving anxiety in terminally ill patients (Tierney 2010). In addition the 2010 MAPS conference in San Jose, CA, a gathering of researchers from all disciplines interested in research with hallucinogens, was the largest one to date.

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<sup>20</sup> Multidisciplinary Association for Psychedelic Studies, <http://www.maps.org/>

<sup>21</sup> <http://www.heffter.org/>. The Institute is named after Dr. Arthur Heffter, a turn-of-the century German research pharmacologist who discovered that mescaline was the principal psychoactive component in the peyote cactus.

### **The legacy of the 1960s**

Many of the ideas previously discussed were at the heart of the 1960s psychedelic counterculture movements. The ideas of some of the authors discussed above (i.e. Huxley) found fertile ground in the culture during that time and initiated a shift in attitudes towards hallucinogens that resulted in mass hysteria by the end of the decade. Even Eliade (1963) who argued that hallucinogens were only a vulgar substitute for pure trance softened his position after the 1960s shift in attitudes. Beat writers such as Allen Ginsberg with his poems on LSD, also contributed to the increased interest in these substances.

Gordon Wasson, a former banker, who visited Mexico in the 1950s and tried psilocybin mushrooms with Maria Sabina, later publishing his account in *Life* magazine (Wasson 1957), is responsible for the waves of Western seekers that flooded Oaxaca in the 1960s. One could compare what happened in Oaxaca to what is happening in Iquitos today, with the exception that Iquitos was a not a small village flooded with ayahuasca tourists and the effect of tourism might not have been as disruptive. In fact, ayahuasca tourists are only a fraction of the tourism that the area receives and tourism in general provides valuable revenue to the area. Wasson himself, even though he was responsible for popularizing mushrooms and effectively changing the history of the area, frowned upon these spiritual pilgrimages (Znamenski 2007). The effects of this influx and the ways westerners were viewed by Mazatecos are discussed by Feinberg (2003).

During the 1960s Timothy Leary became an advocate for the use of

psychedelics and they became central in some countercultures. However, today Leary is a controversial figure and causes uneasiness even within the psychedelic community and is considered to have contributed to the negative public image of hallucinogens with his provocative and irresponsible behavior.

I see today's *psychedelic renaissance*, as it is sometimes referred to as a continuation of this old relationship of the West with ASCs and mind altering substances, with a more cautious and responsible attitude. Several supporters of the view that psychedelics can be beneficial argue that the aversion to hallucinogens is a product of our modern–capitalist–world and there was a time when humans had a healthier relationship with these substances, when “direct knowledge of the sacred was a natural and universal part of human existence” (Pinchbeck 2004:60).

### **The entheogenic paradigm**

The most recent term used in the literature and the one most widely accepted by participants in ayahuasca ceremonies to refer to hallucinogens, is Entheogenic. The term *entheogen* (Ruck et al. 1979), meaning “bringing forth the divine within”, is used to connote a shift in attitudes in the way these substances are viewed. Free of the cultural baggage of previous terms, the word brings attention to the spiritual motives and experiences of the users.

The term comes from the Greek words:

En = Within, Inner

Theo = Divine, God

## Gen = Becoming, Creating

This is how Jonathan Ott tells the story of the creation of the word in his book “*The Age of Entheogens & the Angels Dictionary*”:

In 1978 R. Gordon Wasson convened an informal committee of researchers interested in the ethnopharmacognosy of shamanic inebriants, to look for a substitute for inadequate terms like 'hallucinogenic' (which implied delusion and/or falsity, besides suggesting pathology to psychotherapists), 'psychotomimetic' (implying also pathology) and 'psychedelic' (besides being a pejorative term prejudicing shamanic inebriants in the eyes of persons unfamiliar with the field, this term had become so invested with connotations of 1960s Western 'counterculture' as to make it incongruous to speak of a shaman ingesting a *psychedelic* plant).

I have summarized the history of *psychedelic* and *hallucinogenic* in my recent book *Pharmactheon*. Members of our committee were classical scholars Carl A.P. Ruck and Danny Staples of Boston University, and independent entheobotanist Jeremy Bigwood, Wasson and me. One of Ruck's early suggestions was *epoptic* from the Greek *epoptai* [ ...singular in ancient Greek is "epoptes"... ;- ) ] to describe initiates to the Eleusinian Mysteries who had seen *ta hiera*, 'the holy'. Wasson didn't like this term... as he said, it sounded like 'pop, goes the weasel!' I proposed *pharmactheon*, which had the advantage of already being in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, but it seemed too much a mouthful, besides not adapting gracefully to the adjectival form.

We finally settled on the neologism *entheogenic*, from the Greek *entheos*, a term used in the classical world to describe prophetic or poetic inspiration. The term means literally 'becoming divine within', and can be seen as the user realizing that the divine infuses all of the creation, or specifically that the *entheogenic* plant is itself infused with the divine. It is *not* a theological term, makes no reference to any deity, and is not meant to be a pharmacological term for designating a specific chemical class of drugs (*psychedelic*, for example, has come to be seen by some *sensu strictu* as a term to designate mescaline-like B-phenethylamines or DMT-like tryptamines). Rather, it is a cultural term to include all of the shamanic inebriants – sacraments, plant teachers, the stock-in-trade of shamans the world over.

As Bernard Ortiz de Montellano has pointed out, this word best reflects traditional conceptions of shamanic inebriation, as indicated by ancient Nahuatl terms *itech quinehua* 'it takes possession of him' or *itech quiza* 'it comes out in him' to describe this (Ortiz de Montellano 1990). We launched the neologism in the *Journal of Psychedelic Drugs*, in an issue which I edited and in which I suggested the name be changed to *Journal of Entheogenic Drugs*. This didn't come to pass, but I think I influenced the editors to change the name to *Journal of Psychoactive Drugs* two years later, consigning *psychedelic* ever more to the obscurity it deserves. By my

count, our new word has appeared in print in at least seven languages; the major European languages plus Catalan, and has been widely accepted by many leading experts in the field. I expect the recent publication of my *Pharmacotheon* to establish the word more solidly in the English-, German-, and Spanish-speaking worlds. [Ott 1995:37]

The attitude in the ayahuasca community is that of sacramental use of these substances. People will also refer to cannabis and psilocybin mushrooms as sacraments. This denotes a major shift in attitudes about hallucinogens in opposition to recreational use. Today they are often viewed as a gateway to another world giving access to wisdom otherwise inaccessible<sup>22</sup>.

### **Ayahuasca in the West**

Some scholars argue that evidence from pre-Columbian rock drawings suggests thousands of years of ayahuasca use in the Upper Amazon, and Orinoco (Furst 1976, Schultes, Hoffman and Rátsch 2001) and this is generally accepted in the ayahuasca community as true. In fact, it is maybe the only hallucinogen that does not have a history of recreational use and is a prime example of the substance the term *entheogen* is meant to describe. According to Uzendoski (2008:19) “to describe ayahuasca as a hallucinogenic or a drug is to invoke Western histories of repressing people and substances. It would be to ignore the visceral role the body plays in experiencing ayahuasca poetry”. Most of the information we have about ayahuasca comes from early travelers in the Amazon, later from ethnographies and of course

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<sup>22</sup> Shamanism is mentioned as: “...a doorway to the spirit world around us...”, in the following website: <http://deoxy.org/shaman.htm>

recently it is hard to browse popular media, fiction books, or turn on the TV and not run into some sort of reference to ayahuasca.

One of the earliest Western encounters with ayahuasca was recorded in 1853. The author was Richard Spruce, a former British schoolteacher, who was a botanist looking for new plants to collect and classify in the Vaupés area in Colombia. In 1851, while exploring the upper Rio Negro of the Brazilian Amazon, he observed the use of ayahuasca. In 1853, he encountered it twice in Peru. He published his observations in "*Notes of a Botanist on the Amazon and Andes*" (Spruce 1908) and as William Emboden (1979:101) indicates, "a more eloquent ethnobotanical chronicle has yet to appear". Spruce became one of botany's greatest collectors. He had heard of *B. caapi* before but while staying at the Ipanoré Falls, a group of Tucano Indians invited him to a feast and offered him a cup of the "nauseous beverage". This is how he described what he witnessed that night:

In two minutes or less after drinking it, the effects begin to be apparent. The Indian turns deadly pale, trembles in every limb, and horror is in his aspect. Suddenly contrary symptoms succeed; he bursts into perspiration, and seems possessed with reckless fury, seizes whatever arms are at hand, his murucú, bow and arrows, or cutlass, and rushes to the doorway, while he inflicts violent blows on the ground and the doorposts, calling out all the while: "Thus would I do to mine enemy (naming him by name) were this he!" In about ten minutes the excitement has passed off, and the Indian grows calm, but appears exhausted. [Spruce 1908:419-420]

Spruce himself had a cup of the brew but did not participate in the ritual and retired to his hammock after having a cup of coffee. He also reported the experience as described to him by other white men who had partaken in the ritual. He says that these participants felt alternations of cold and heat as well as fear and boldness. They

also reported distortions in their sight and rapid visions that alternate between the magnificent and the horrific (Spruce 1908). Spruce suspected that additives were responsible for the psychoactivity of the beverage, although he noted that *B. caapi* by itself was considered psychoactive. The samples he sent to England for chemical analysis were located and assayed in 1966, when it was determined that they were still psychoactive.

Another widely read description of ayahuasca was published in 1858 by Manuel Villavicencio, an Ecuadorian geographer. He described that the experience made him feel he was “flying” to most marvelous places. Some early explorers of Northwestern South America, Martius, Crevaux and Orton also mentioned ayahuasca, yagé and caapi, all speaking of a forest vine but offering little detail (Stafford and Bigwood 1992). Theodor Koch-Grünberg, a German explorer, recorded indigenous myths and traditional belief systems, including those surrounding ayahuasca use (Schultes and Raffauf 1992:10, Koch-Grünberg and Zerries 1967).

In 1923, a film of indigenous ayahuasca ceremonies was shown at the annual meeting of the American Pharmaceutical Association (Stafford and Bigwood 1992, Thies 2009). Other publications around that time described ayahuasca practices in several locations and contexts. Rusby and White, observed ayahuasca practices in Bolivia in 1922, the Russians Varnoff and Jezepezuk, did fieldwork in Colombia in 1925-1926, and Morton, published Klug’s southern Colombian notes about *Banisteriopsis inebrians* in 1931 (Stafford and Bigwood 1992). But the person who



is considered twentieth century's authority in South American ethnobotany is Richard Evans Schultes, the former director of the Botanical Museum of Harvard University. He spent seventeen years studying in the Amazon and his books complete with stunning black and white photographs, remain the best account on hallucinogens in Amazonia.

Interest in ayahuasca arose in the 1960s at the same time with LSD, and “reports that ordinarily would have been restricted to the technical literature received fairly wide circulation” (Stafford and Bigwood 1992:336). Publications like *Psychedelic Review* and *The Psychedelic Reader*, reprinted Richard Evans Schultes' notes to straighten out confusion about ayahuasca. Schultes also gave his account of ayahuasca in lectures to the College of Pharmacy at the University of Texas and in the Harvard Botanical Museum Leaflets (Schultes 1957). These accounts were also republished in popular periodicals and spread knowledge about ayahuasca and its use for divinatory purposes.

A book that introduced ayahuasca to the Western consciousness at that time is the *Yagé Letters*. William Burroughs, a known heroin addict, hoped to find in ayahuasca what he did not find in other drugs. He characteristically wrote: “Yagé may be the final fix” (Lee 1953). Burroughs traveled to South America to try ayahuasca and seven years later Allen Ginsberg did the same; the result was the *Yagé Letters*, their correspondence from that period. However, Burroughs did not find what he was hoping for in ayahuasca or in Peru for that matter. His account is rather negative and unlikely to have attracted people to ayahuasca as much as other first

hand accounts. In one instant he reported "...I had been conned by medicine men" (Burroughs and Ginsberg 1963:15). Ginsberg's account is closer to the stereotypical first person account. Ayahuasca is mentioned in a number of other books written by Burroughs (Lee 1953). Znamenski (2007) points out a fundamental difference and ambivalent relationship between researchers like Schultes and Wasson who only had interest in studying hallucinogens and people like Burroughs who hoped to integrate them in Western cultural and spiritual life.

Several anthropological studies that will be discussed in the following chapters also raised awareness about ayahuasca. One of these studies was Dobkin de Rios' work (1972, 1973), in which she discusses ayahuasca uses in folk healing in an urban setting in Iquitos. Her fieldwork was done largely in the Belén quarter of Iquitos, and she observed ayahuasca being used throughout the region for several purposes. Her book and later Luna's book on ayahuasca use among mestizos in Iquitos increased our knowledge of ayahuasca and made clear that ayahuasca practices were different from other hallucinogens (Luna 1984a, 1984b, 1986).

Reichel-Dolmatoff deserves special mention among anthropologists for his extensive ethnographies with an emphasis on shamanism among the Tucano. His approach was holistic and he covers a lot of ground not only ethnographically but also historically providing a wealth of information on the history of ayahuasca (Reichel-Dolmatoff 1975). He discussed the sexual imagery of ayahuasca visions, its role in Tucano art symbolism, the jaguar complex, as well as the role of ayahuasca in ethnoastronomy (1971, 1972, 1975, and 1981). He also pointed out the dual function

of shamanism in both healing and avenging enemies (1975:103). However, his clearly Freudian focus on the sexual origin of tensions might be unappealing to the contemporary reader.

As discussed previously, many of my consultants said that they found out about ayahuasca by reading about it in a book or other source. Since I started research for this dissertation I started collecting instances where ayahuasca appeared in popular culture, whether it was in literature, film or television, which are too numerous to mention here. A number of popular books have contributed to increasing ayahuasca's reputation including: Manuel Cordova-Rios and Bruce Lamb's *Wizard of the Upper Amazon* (1975), which was exposed as fictional by R. Carneiro<sup>23</sup>, Wade Davis' *One River* (1997) and Luis Eduardo Luna and Pablo Amaringo's *Ayahuasca Visions: The Indigenous Iconography of a Peruvian Shaman* (1999).

### **Scientific studies on ayahuasca**

Aside from socio-cultural studies, there has been a lot of research on ayahuasca from diverse disciplines including botanical studies as well as studies to define its physiological and psychological effects (Callaway et al. 1994, 1996, 1999). In addition, a number of psychological studies suggest that "inner", spiritual or mystical experiences can be scientifically studied. There is a greater effort to determine uses of ayahuasca in Western medicine and psychology as well.

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<sup>23</sup> See full account in Ott 1993.

The early papers of Schultes have contributed to the resolution of problems concerning the botanical identity of *Banisteriopsis* vines (1957, 1982b, 1986). Research with the active compounds of *Banisteriopsis caapi*, harmine and harmaline, began in the 1920s<sup>24</sup>. For a long time it was thought that the active hallucinogenic substances in ayahuasca were contained in *B. caapi*. Scientists tried to determine the hallucinogenic effects of *B. caapi* but most studies showed no such effects. Its effects seem to be more sedative and tranquilizing. The fact that it was the admixture plants in the ayahuasca brew that caused hallucinations and became active by the *B. caapi* compounds was first suggested in the 1960s by Bristol as well as Der Marderosian and Agurell (Ott 1993:226). A few quantitative analyses have been made to determine the active doses of the compounds found in ayahuasca brews (Ott 1993). There also have been reports of brew containing only *B. caapi* but there are no quantitative studies of those. Dennis McKenna (1984, 2006) was one of the first to analyze the chemistry of ayahuasca and is still the most knowledgeable ethnopharmacologist on ayahuasca.

Some work has been done on native plant classification. Schultes and Hofmann report that South American natives often have special names for diverse “kinds” of Ayahuasca, although the botanist frequently finds them all representative of the same species. It is usually difficult to understand the aboriginal method of classification: some may be age forms; others may come from different parts of the liana; still others may be ecological forms growing under varying conditions of soil, shade, moisture, etc. The natives assert that these “kinds” have a variety of effects, and it is conceivable that they may actually have different chemical compositions. This possibility is one of the least

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<sup>24</sup> See Ott 1993: 223-231, for a detailed list of studies.

investigated yet most significant aspects in the study of ayahuasca. [Schultes and Hofmann 1992:120]

Indigenous groups are said to distinguish at least six different botanical sources of ayahuasca and the two most powerful ones have not yet been described botanically or chemically (Stafford and Bigwood 1992).

Harmaline has been used in psychotherapy by Claudio Naranjo (1973, 1974), a Chilean psychiatrist and psychopharmacologist, who came up with some fascinating conclusions. He found the effects of harmaline to be relatively calming and subtle, his subjects reporting relaxed states of philosophical and religious contemplation, without emotional turmoil. More neuropsychiatric research has been conducted with generally positive results. The idea is that therapy with ayahuasca can help treat drug or alcohol addiction or even serious psychological disorders. I will not expand on this literature here but it is certainly a field that needs more attention.

The need for more research to understand how hallucinogens affect cognitive processes has been argued (Riba and Barbanoj 2005) and clinical research conducted in Spain at the Autonomous University of Barcelona on healthy volunteers attempts to remedy this. EEG measurements have shown that changes in electrical activity in the brain reflect subjective effects reaching their peak between 45 and 120 minutes after ingestion and returning to baseline after four to six hours (Riba et al. 2002a). Another study concluded a decremental effect of ayahuasca on sensory gating (the process by which the brain adjusts its response to stimuli (Riba et al. 2002b).

Cardiovascular effects include significant increase in blood pressure and moderate increase in heart rate (Riba et al. 2003). Other studies have shown the effect on EEG activity on different areas of the brain (Riba et al. 2004), while a study measuring blood flow to different areas of the brain showed increased blood flow to regions of the brain involved in emotional arousal (Riba et al. 2006). All physiological effects are dependent on dosage. In a study among members of the UDV church in Brazil, long-term users had significantly higher densities of serotonin transporters in platelets compared to matched controls (Callaway et al. 1994), which might have implications in research about depression and compulsive behavior.

Some research has been done on the long-term effects of ayahuasca use. In 1993, a large international team of scientists started, including Dennis McKenna, the so-called “Hoasca Project” with the goal to gather data in order to determine the biomedical effects of Ayahuasca. The study was carried out among the followers of “União do Vegetal” (UDV), which uses ayahuasca in its ceremonies. This was probably the most comprehensive investigation of the chemistry, psychological effects, and psychopharmacology of a psychedelic drug to be carried out. The study established that the regular use of ayahuasca, at least within the ritual context and supportive social environment is safe and without long term toxicity, and moreover has lasting, positive influences on physical and mental health. The people interviewed also stressed the positive changes in their lives because of their participation in the UDV church and the use of ayahuasca (Dennis McKenna et al. 1992, 1994, 1995, 1996 and 1998). Salient findings included the remission of

psychopathology following the initiation of hoasca use along with no evidence of personality or cognitive deterioration. Overall, assessment revealed high functional status.

A more recent study was that of Rick Strassman (2001), who began a psychedelic study in 1990. He is a clinical associate professor at the University Of New Mexico School Of Medicine and carried out research by injecting people with DMT the potent alkaloid in ayahuasca. He believes that psychedelic study has value but in special clinics and not in a sterile hospital environment. After years of research, he suggests that researchers remain open to the possibility that other “realities” exist, and that certain molecules can tune us in to them.

The case of the clinic *Takiwasi* in Tarapoto, Peru, which uses traditional shamanic techniques to treat drug addiction, is indicative of the interest in ayahuasca research among psychologists. Takiwasi is a “Center for the Rehabilitation of Drug Addicts and for Research on Traditional Medicines” and “started operating in Tarapoto City – Peru since 1992, managing an alternative of treatment for one of the contemporaneous problems that is affecting to many persons from different social and cultural conditions, as soon as different ages: The Drug Addiction<sup>25</sup>”. Their methods are a combination of traditional medicine with modern psychological approaches. The rationale is that “our ignorance in regard to the controlled induction of altered states of consciousness could greatly benefit from ancestral medical knowledge” (Mabit et al. 2002:29). In the same article, Mabit et al. explain how

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<sup>25</sup> <http://www.takiwasi.com/>

ayahuasca helps overcome drug addiction by facilitating the psychotherapeutic work. Takiwasi is a non-profit organization and their staff includes doctors, psychologists, empirical ethnobotanists, healers and several assistant therapists. It also offers outpatient services. The clinic allows outsiders as well as researchers from diverse disciplines to spend periods of time, up to six months, in the clinic studying their methods of healing in exchange for volunteer work at their facilities.

Some believe that pharmacological studies with ayahuasca are not the priority. As Benny Shanon—a cognitive psychologist—says, “The real puzzles this brew presents pertain, I think, neither to botany nor to culture but rather to the human mind. As such, the study of Ayahuasca belongs first and foremost to the domain of psychology, and more specifically cognitive psychology—the discipline investigating the workings of the human mind” (Shanon 1997). The same author recently published his book *Antipodes of the Mind*, a cognitive psychological study of ayahuasca (Shannon 2002).

Thus, there is a sustained interest in the scientific community since the 1960s for more research with hallucinogens. Researchers like Narby (2000), have also argued for the need to integrate indigenous ways of knowing with Western science.



### Chapter 3: Shamanic tourism

In the 1980s a new phenomenon, the so-called “*drug tourism*” (Dobkin de Rios, 1994), appeared in Amazonia. The first mentions of it in the media and scholarly sources date as far back as the 1990s. As early as 1980, “a California group was promoting a ‘Shamans and Healers of Ecuador’ tour at the rather steep price of \$1790 plus airfare” (Ott 1993). The term “*ayahuasca tourism*” can also be found as early as the 1990s. As Grunwell (1998) comments: “Within the last fifteen years or so, a grass roots ayahuasca tourism industry has sprung up, with outposts all over Amazonia. Perhaps the ayahuasca tourism phenomenon is best understood as part of this culture, a culture that increasingly seeks to know itself and nature better, both as individual entities and interconnected systems”. Another article (Proctor 2001) mentions that “ayahuasca ceremonies can be purchased in most major tourist destinations in Peru, and numerous jungle lodges now offer ceremonies or retreats, the latter costing in the neighborhood of \$700-\$1500 a week”.

I chose to use the term *shamanic tourism* as opposed to the more often used term *drug tourism* to refer to this phenomenon, because I see a substantial difference between the two. The latter tends to be used more when speaking of the recreational consumption of drugs as well as travel to exotic places (popular destinations are Amsterdam, Southeast Asia and South America) with the intention to smuggle illegal drugs. This is not the case with ayahuasca shamanism and at least one more researcher has pointed this out as well (Winkelman 2005). Even though there is a number of tourists that will try the experience out of curiosity, because it is so widely

talked about in Iquitos, most people will begin their quest with a specific motive in mind. The unpleasantness of the experience, physical and psychological, alone disputes any claims for recreational use of ayahuasca as well. Finally, the experience often involves the participation to a shamanic *dieta* (see chapter 7), which involves fasting and the ingestion of non-hallucinogenic plants. I have also come across the term “*mystical tourism*” (turismo místico) at least once in a short article in a Peruvian newspaper discussing ayahuasca and in two scholarly works (Hill 2005, Flores Ochoa 1996), but the term seems to include a variety of activities that do not apply in this context; the term “*spiritual tourism*” has also been used for similar phenomena (Owen 2006), but also encompasses a wider range of activities. I have also encountered the term “*entheogen tourism*” (Harvey and Wallis 2007), which is closer to ayahuasca tourism but does not necessarily account for the aspects of the shamanic experience I mention above. For these reasons in this context the term *shamanic tourism* is more appropriate.

Many of my consultants would not be comfortable with the word tourist because of its negative connotations; anthropologists themselves have been ambivalent about studying tourists (Wallace 2005). It is often associated with something superficial or detrimental and there is a hint of judgment when one is referred to as a tourist. A lot has been written about the negative effects of tourism (Nash 1989). It is no surprise that I was treated with suspicion when I told people I was studying tourists. This is why I feel I have to clarify that I will not be using the word with any value judgment attached to it, rather I use the word tourism to mean

any travel for any purpose or duration when the traveler has the intention of returning to their home.

Even though the ayahuasca experience is possible throughout the world, through the use of “ayahuasca analogues” (Ott 1994), people still take the expensive trip to South America with the expectation of having the “authentic” experience. There is some shamanic tourism activity in Ecuador and other countries such as Brazil, but Peru and specifically Iquitos seems to attract the majority of it. There are a few reasons why Iquitos is such a hot spot for ayahuasca tourism. Even though Pucallpa, a town in central Peru also has a reputation for shamanism (especially Shipibo), tourism has not developed as much as in Iquitos. The reason is that Pucallpa is a smaller town with fewer amenities to offer to Western tourists and does not have a permanent port so transportation is more difficult. Iquitos is much more urban and is also considered safer. It has also a fairly large expatriate community. Many people still consider Pucallpa a better place to get a more authentic experience but some successful shamans have moved from Pucallpa to Iquitos because of safety concerns. The increase of access to ayahuasca ceremonies in Peru has also been accounted to the collapse of the Shining Path’s rebels that has made it safer to travel in the Peruvian Amazon in the 1990s (Elton 1999).

For a long time Iquitos was the ecotourism gateway to the Amazon. It is surrounded by a number of jungle lodges and is relatively close to a reserve (Pacaya Samiria). As interest in ayahuasca among westerners increased, lodges started offering ayahuasca ceremonies as part of their ecotourism packages in the 1990s.

Participation to them was optional. Today, there are an increasing number of lodges that specialize in ayahuasca retreats<sup>26</sup>. Most places focusing on ayahuasca ceremonies and catering to westerners are on the road that leads from Iquitos to Nauta and is the only road connecting Iquitos to another place. A few more experienced ayahuasca drinkers will often participate in ceremonies held in the city in the house of the shaman.

Around Iquitos are a number of lodges that offer ecotourism tours as well as shamanic ceremonies with local shamans. Most of them have websites and bring groups directly from the United States or Europe through established contacts there. They also have offices in the city for the tourists that come to Iquitos looking for a tour. Most of these offices have representatives that walk around looking for tourists and get paid on commission. Most hotels and some restaurants will refer clients to these offices and get commissions as well. Consequently, there is great competition for tourists and often rivalries arise between locals that take the form of spreading rumors about competitors. Because of this, most companies prefer to bring groups directly from abroad.

During my fieldwork between 2003 and 2005 there was a small but steady flow of visitors that were in Iquitos specifically for ayahuasca. In 2005, an employee of the municipal tourist office told me that they estimate the number of ayahuasca tourists to be about 200 a year, a number that at the time seemed realistic based on

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<sup>26</sup> An initial attempt to record all these lodges was abandoned because of the fluidity of the field and of the speed in which lodges and retreats appear and disappear, change hands or state of purpose, which rendered my list hopelessly outdated.

my own observations. In the last few years after the end of my fieldwork this number has probably doubled. One of the reasons for that is that in the summer of 2005 an American living in Iquitos had the idea of organizing an annual conference on shamanism in order to bring scientists and shamans together, providing a safe environment for first time users to learn about ayahuasca and participate in ceremonies with local shamans in between conference sessions. The first conference had 200 attendees with similar numbers in the consequent years. This means that hundreds of new visitors started coming to Iquitos specifically for ayahuasca. Another event that spiked interest in ayahuasca and Iquitos was an article published in National Geographic Travel (Salak 2006), which made such an impression that attracted an even greater number of visitors.

During my stay in Iquitos I rented a room and later a small apartment in the city and I used that as my permanent base. Depending on who I was working with at the time, I would sometimes spent days or weeks in the jungle either at a lodge or at smaller, more modest facility that specialized in ayahuasca ceremonies. There were periods that I would work with shamans in the city, in which case I would participate in ceremonies in the evening at the house of the shaman and either return to my apartment afterward or spend the night at the shaman's house (this was done with one shaman who lived in a community adjacent to Iquitos because it was deemed unsafe to return from that area late in the night). I also spent time with tourists in the city and interviewed most of them in my apartment usually in exchange for lunch or dinner. Toward the end of my fieldwork I offered to some of them tarot card

readings in order to express my appreciation for their participation in my study something that they seemed to respond well to.

I participated in over 60 ayahuasca ceremonies in various contexts. I did not work with one shaman specifically, 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 more than one perspective in my dissertation. Even though an apprenticeship would provide me with a deeper perspective of the work of one shaman, it would mean a commitment to that particular shaman and would prevent me from participating in ceremonies of other shamans and having a broader perspective. I worked with 9 shamans, interviewed 82 people and had informal conversations with several dozen more. Interviews revolved around people's backgrounds, their reasons for pursuing ayahuasca shamanism, how they found out about it, what benefits they saw from it, their experiences and how they made sense of them as well as details about the way they prepared themselves for the experience. Informal conversations did not touch on all of the above but tended to focus more on experiences and their impressions of specific shamans.

The first question that comes to mind when talking about shamanic tourism is who are the participants? Most of us would imagine that the majority of them would be rather marginalized in our culture. But a closer look reveals no patterns in age, class, education or social status. The only disparity I found was one of gender with more than twice as many men than women in my sample. This is odd, especially since according to other studies women are "disproportionately represented in New

Age religious practices” (Brown 1997:95). However, given the challenges that travel in South America poses for female travelers this gender discrepancy in this case makes sense. Also as it will become obvious, there are differences between shamanic tourism and the New Age. People interested in Ayahuasca come from a variety of backgrounds. Some of my interviewees were middle class professionals, and even though many of them were pursuing unconventional careers, the majority were people with regular jobs and commitments. Even though about half had no college education, all were well read. Many travel to Iquitos specifically to take ayahuasca, while others find out about it while traveling and decide to try it. If the trip is made for the purpose of taking ayahuasca then some reading of the numerous books on ayahuasca and shamanism has preceded. Contrary to what would be expected, many of these participants have never tried other hallucinogens. In the larger scheme of things, this sacramental use of ayahuasca is only embraced by a small, but increasing, part of Western society and a fraction of the tourist flow to Iquitos.

More specifically, among the people I interviewed were 60 males and 22 females. Their ages ranged from 20 to 61 years. Thirty-six, almost half, were from the United States and Canada. Thirteen were Peruvian and the remaining were mostly from Europe. At least 23 said they never tried other hallucinogens before ayahuasca and more than half did not travel to South America or Iquitos specifically to try ayahuasca. Most were raised Christian but did not consider themselves religious, rather they preferred the term “spiritual” or used some other personalized term. The vast majority found out about ayahuasca either from friends or relatives or

from books. Experience with ayahuasca also varied among my sample, I interviewed people who only had been in a couple of ceremonies and others who had been in hundreds. I need to caution that even though some of my findings and numbers might be typical for ayahuasca users, others are not. Some of these numbers would change considerably depending on the context in which they were collected. For example if I had only worked with people in one of the lodges that specialize in ayahuasca retreats, then I suspect I would have gotten more people with no previous experience with hallucinogens, because inexperienced users tend to feel safer in the more structured environment of the lodge.

### **Motives of shamanic tourists**

The next question and one that guided my research is “what are the motives of westerners pursuing shamanic experiences”? I will summarize their motives, some of which will be discussed in ethnographic detail in the following chapters. Some authors (Dobkin de Rios 1994, Grunwell 1998) attribute Western interest to the fact that westerners seek novel experiences not offered by their culture. Dobkin de Rios emphasizes “the empty self of the post-World War II period, a self which is soothed and made cohesive by becoming filled up by consuming food, consumer products, and experiences” (1994). This perspective does not leave any room for the possibility that westerners might have a meaningful or engaging ayahuasca experiences. Kristensen found that there were four main reasons that people became ayahuasca tourists: self-exploration and spiritual growth, curiosity, physical and emotional



healing, and the desire for a vacation to an exotic location (1998:15). All these motives have been quoted as motives of tourism and pilgrimage as well. The common theme that can be discerned below is the attractiveness of anything that is perceived as the antithesis of Western civilization: pre-industrial, pre-modern, natural, exotic, spiritual, sacred, traditional and timeless. As I have already shown, this is a yearning that runs deep in Western culture.

### **The archaic mystique**

For many, participating in shamanic ceremonies fulfils a need to connect to an archaic past, or a desire for continuity of consciousness from ancient times. The past is thought to hold what the modern lacks and that is located in cultural others—consumable by moderns in their search for self-fulfillment (Fabian 1983). There is also a desire to be more connected to nature and less destructive to the planet and reintroduce the sacred into their lives. In seeking an explanation why there is such an increased interest in ayahuasca worldwide, Ralph Metzner suggests that “the revival of shamanism and sacred plants is part of the worldwide trend seeking for a renewal of the spiritual relationship with the natural world” and “a new awareness, or rather a revival of ancient awareness of the organic and spiritual interconnectedness of all life on this planet” (1999:4). He sees that as an attempt to bring together the split between the sacred and the natural that Western civilization has brought about with the rise of the mechanistic paradigms in science. Shamanism is seen as timeless and

universal and according to neoshamanism everyone has the ability to ‘remember’ everything we have lost in the West due to the influence of Christianity.

This idea is not entirely new, but has previously been expressed by artists and scholars such as the romantic poets, Antonin Artaud (1976), Aldous Huxley (1954) and Walter Benjamin (1996). They expressed the yearning to recover the sense of sacred that European culture had lost and pursued altered states of consciousness as a form of rebellion against industrialization and to facilitate personal transformation. Similar ideas have been expressed by Karl Jung (2001) and Mircea Eliade (1959), who lament the loss of magic in European culture. Western culture is perceived as deficient in this respect and the remedy is sought for among the traditions and beliefs of indigenous peoples. There is a general yearning to connect to our “tribal past”, the wisdom of our ancestors, a wisdom that is not culturally specific but rather is perceived as “universal”. The ritual is fundamental in this process, and consultants have stressed the importance of context in the ingestion of ayahuasca and the positive effects of the ritual in itself. This is one of the reasons they will take the expensive trip to Peru. According to them the structure of the ritual provides a framework to do healing and spiritual work something that Western culture lacks.

Shamanism becomes the “embodiment of pre-Westernness, pre-modernness” what Greene calls “the West’s historically and temporally subordinated *ante-self*, that perennial prior self doomed to the temporal stasis of primitivity” (1998:642). Shamanism just as traditional medicine in general has been viewed as “epistemologically and practically static” (Greene 1998:634) in the West. These

misconceptions have been cultivated over years in many types of discourse such as development. Therefore, that these ideas prevail among tourists is not a surprise. After all, a reason why Amazonia is so attractive to a particular type of tourist is that, apart from its ecological importance, it is considered to be the home to some of the last primordial peoples of this planet. Occasional articles in the press warn of the rapid disappearance of the knowledge and lore of indigenous tribes and of shamans in particular (Greene 1998:641). A similar discourse that wants hallucinogenic mushrooms to symbolize the timeless natural world in Southern Mexico is discussed by Feinberg (2003).

Earlier scholarly work has presented the indigenous peoples of the area as culturally intact, like Lewis and Lewis, who see traditional Shuar medicine as a static body of knowledge stating that “they use plants now as they have for perhaps thousands of years” (1994:61). Similar comments were made by most of my consultants, who were under the impression that the ceremonies that they participated in were identical to the ceremonies that indigenous peoples did “for thousands of years”. This point of view denies the obvious influence of the West on these cultures, as well as the cultures’ response to that influence. In the context of this discourse the figure of the shaman becomes mythologized and is presented as the preserver of ancient tradition. This perspective is not particularly interested in the reality of the present but more likely is looking for traces of the primordial in present shamanic practices. Shamanism is therefore essentialized and removed from its historical and cultural context.

This is definitely true for first time or inexperienced participants but I have found that with time and more involvement, participants would develop a more nuanced view of Amazonian shamanism.

### **Accessing the sacred**

Ayahuasca experiences are attractive to Western people because, in a way, they give them direct access to the spiritual and the divine within. There is no intermediary as in organized religions. For some, it is a political act, rejecting organized religion and seeking out a more democratic way. They feel that traditionally religious authorities of every form claimed to monopolize the access to the divine agency and priests became the mediators between the people and the divine. They became necessary for the function of society because they regulate important activities. These new alternative spirituality movements find these mediators unnecessary and look for ways for every individual to tap into the divine.

Spirituality is defined differently by different people. According to Krippner and Welch, the *California State Psychological Association Task Force on Spirituality and Psychotherapy*, adopted a definition of spirituality that states: “it has been said that spirituality is ‘the courage to look within and trust’. What is seen and what is trusted appears to be a deep sense of belonging, of wholeness, of connectedness, and of the openness to the infinite” (1992:63). They go on to add that spiritual is not a synonym for “religious” because a religion is an institutionalized body of believers who accept a common set of beliefs, practices and rituals regarding

spiritual concerns and issues (1992:6). Most of my consultants declared themselves “spiritual but not religious”. In addition they drew material from diverse cultural sources such as Buddhism and yogic traditions.

In 1934, Jung argued that the decline of magic and religion in our society is harmful because it hinders individuation. This might explain the increasing popularity of ayahuasca and other entheogens among westerners, since it provides the much needed spiritual experiences of which people feel deprived. Eliade also argued that sacred experience predominates in oral societies and that “modern man has desacralised his world” (1959:13). Like Jung, he also argued that hierophanies, in other words manifestations of the sacred in nature, can help one resolve life’s critical situations (1979). Many of my consultants have reported spiritual experiences with ayahuasca and some admit to be more spiritual because of it. As one person put it, “It gave me a new perspective on life, on what it all is about. It resulted in enhanced meaningfulness for me in many, many aspects of my personal life. It caused me to believe in spirit and God for the first time in my life.” Others have shared that they met and talked to historical spiritual figures in their visions, such as the Buddha or Jesus and even God.

### **Healing**

A vast majority of participants in shamanic ceremonies are motivated by a desire to be healed and have reported successful healing from both psychological and physical ailments. Shamanism is seen as the most radically other to Western

biomedicine, when compared to other traditional ethnomedical practices (Bastien 1992:93). It is not surprising that this is where people frustrated by Western medicine and medical paradigms will turn to, seeking a more holistic healing that is enabled by the greater contact to nature. In this quest for healing, there is a critique of Western medical knowledge.

Ayahuasca is reported to be especially effective in healing issues caused by traumatic experiences as well as depression. It is also being used in a drug addiction rehabilitation clinic in the town of Tarapoto in Peru. Cleansing or purging is very important in the healing process and is perceived as spiritual, as well as physical cleansing. When purging during the ceremony, an indispensable part of the ayahuasca experience, many have reported the feeling that they were purging the negative things accumulated in their bodies over years, often referred to as “psychic garbage”. In the healing process the idea that the individual is responsible for their own healing or non-healing is very important—characteristically they would say that “everyone is their own shaman”. Healing by intervention of spirits is reported many times as well.

### **Personal transformation**

Shamanic ceremonies also provide the ideal setting for the personal transformation of the participants. This stems from the belief that cultural conditioning in the West teaches rationality, materialism, and disbelief in spiritual reality, something that creates a void in need to be filled. For some, the ayahuasca

experience poses a challenge and offers a greater spiritual experience as well as a way to connect to their “inner self”. One said that he was attracted by the fact that it forces one to face one’s “demons”. Many of my consultants have made a distinction between Ego and the higher self, a concept central in yoga as well as New Age teachings. The ego learns to function in society while the real self remains suppressed a fact that creates conflict. The hidden self needs to be found if one is to regain ownership of oneself. Many authors (e.g. Grof) have stressed the fact that psychedelic experience causes dissolution of the ego and is a catalyst for personal transformation and substances such as LSD have been used in psychotherapy successfully (Grinspoon and Bakalar 1981). As Baker (1994) has argued, because this type of experience challenges preconceived notions about the world and oneself, in proper context, it can be a powerful tool for restoring both individual and group equilibrium. Many people report that this process is more important than the visions induced by ayahuasca.

On the other hand, lack of context or a framework for Western people for interpreting the visionary experience can cause misconceptions. In indigenous cultures, there is a very specific geography and structure of the other worlds shamans visit in their trance, a structure that is learned during their apprenticeship. On the other hand, in a very Jungian manner, some westerners interpret their visions in a more personal or psychological way. If this is the case, they interpret the beings or demons in their visions as manifestations of conflicts in their subconscious mind. While traditionally shamanism was a healing force for the community, in this context

it becomes about healing the individual. I encountered what has been called “psychologizing the religious”, using the cosmos as a tool for “therapizing the psyche” (Vitebsky 1995:287), very often in my fieldwork. Kleinman (1986:55-56), speaks of a “psychologizing process” which has affected American culture since WWI, and forms part of a “cultural transformation in which the self has been culturally constituted as the now dominant Western ethnopsychology”. Thus, the psyche replaces religion. With this movement from the cosmological to the psychological, the shamanic journey becomes not a journey to other worlds but a journey of the mind to the subconscious.

However, in the context of shamanic tourism this is not a one-way movement. Many westerners who engage with Amazonian shamanism for an extended time end up interpreting what we would perceive as psychological processes in the West using “spirit” vocabulary, as I will show in chapter 7.

### **Authenticity and interculturality**

An issue that comes up often in this type of tourism just as in ethnic tourism is that of authenticity. Shamanic tourism does not only bring westerners in contact with the “divine other” but is also connecting them with the “*exotic* other”. The shamans embody this exotic other and often tourists have preconceived notions of what constitutes the authentic. However, as it has been shown in the case of ethnic tourism, when natives try to conform to tourists’ expectations of authenticity, said authenticity is immediately lost (van den Berghe 1994). People, including shamans,



adapt constantly to new circumstances and as anthropologists have stressed, culture constantly takes new forms and should never be viewed as static. Bruner (2005) has argued that the dichotomy of authenticity versus inauthenticity may be a false one and regards culture as always alive and changing. Since cultures constantly reinvent themselves, every cultural act, including shamanism, should be considered authentic.

However, intercultural exchange in the context of tourism, especially shamanic tourism, has been heavily criticized. Joralemon (1990), discussing the case of Peruvian shaman Eduardo Calderón, initially expresses his indignation toward the commercialization of shamanism. He is critical to both westerners who naively perceive the performance of shamans as authentic and the shaman himself who is transformed to a “clown in a New Age circus” (Joralemon 1990:109). He goes on to compare Villoldo (the neoshaman/psychologist who commercialized Calderón) to himself, expressing a sort of superiority as having more of a sense of what is truly authentic and implying that a shaman who works with westerners is not authentic. This is indicative of a very big issue that has no black and white answer. However, he also argues that neoshamanism can be of ethnographic value and that “anthropologists might well study the choices of these culture consumers and the way the resulting mosaics reformulate local traditions to express the shopper’s implicit premise” (Joralemon 1990:112).

Despite the fact that most westerners pursuing ayahuasca experiences have read about it and have access to the literature, misconceptions about shamanism abound. They believe that this form of shamanism has been practiced exactly this

way for thousands of years. They overlook the historical and cultural context of shamanism; for example Amazonian cosmology is ignored, because it does not fit life in the West. They also overlook the ambiguous aspects of shamanism, which will be discussed in chapter 4, such as sorcery, even though now they are starting to take them into account, as more and more have been involved in cases of sorcery. In addition, tourists have unrealistic perceptions of indigenous and local people. They romanticize them only to be disappointed in their first few days in Peru. Dobkin de Rios also addresses this issue when she argues that drug tourists "...see the Noble Savage in the visage of the urban poor carpenter, tradesman, or day laborer. They see exotic people of color untouched by civilization, who are close to nature... drug tourists perceive the natives as timeless and ahistoric" (1994:17).

An ethnographic example that pertains to shamanic tourism is the reaction of some westerners to a plant dieta, as discussed by one of my consultants:

"The spirits will come to you during your dream time and will teach you. but many westerners come and think that they will have what they consider a stereotypical or Indian or native, tribal dreams and that is supposed to describe to them that something shamanic is taking place, but they are filled with great doubt. Really, the spirits will come and teach you through the metaphors and dreams that you know well. So a lot of the time westerners find themselves in dreams like mountainous areas that they know, or cities that they know or things like that. And they think this is not shamanic, this diet is not working."

One aspect of shamanic tourism that is criticized is the introduction of foreign concepts to the vocabulary of the curanderos. Joralemon (1990) mentions the case of Eduardo Calderón, Peruvian shaman, whose involvement with neoshamans has had the effect of blending traditional healing with New Age terminology. I

observed the same phenomenon in Iquitos. Foreign concepts—from Asian traditions—are adopted by the shamans in order to accommodate tourist expectations and needs. Notably, a mestizo shaman with whom I worked for two months would often refer to the body's chakras, or energy centers, a concept borrowed from eastern spirituality. People, including shamans, adapt constantly to new circumstances and as anthropologists soon realized, culture was always taking new forms and can never be viewed as static. While cultural exchange has always been part of shamanism and curanderos have been always been eager to adopt foreign powerful elements—for example biomedical symbolism has been part of curanderismo for a long time (Greene 1998)—the factor of tourism might speed this process up. As a result, the shamans who have figured out the expectations of the tourists about what is authentic attract the most people.

Some aspects that tourists consider authentic are the dress of the curanderos, exclusion of Christian elements, as well as their location. For example they consider being in a “clinic” or retreat near Iquitos the authentic experience, because they are in the jungle just a few kilometers outside of the city, while locals drink ayahuasca in dark rooms in the city. The clothes that some of these shamans wear during ceremonies, are a mixture of attire from the surrounding ethnic groups, mainly Shipibo, who sell their crafts in the streets of Iquitos, or bought at the market. Most curanderos who choose this attire wear a long robe with Shipibo imagery and usually some sort of head dress made of feathers. I have seen tourists be impressed by these shamans. For example at the Amazonian Shamanism Conference in 2005 it was said

that the sign up sheets for the shamans who wore indigenous dress filled up much more quickly than the ones for shamans that were older and more experienced but were dressed in Western clothes and did not make an impression.

The “authentic” mestizo shamans that cater to Peruvians wear regular Western clothes and are Christian. For example an older shaman that works from his house in Iquitos and has no lodge in the jungle always has a picture of Jesus in front of him during ceremony. Some tourists might initially be put off by the fact that these shamans are Christian, because they do not identify with Christianity themselves, others just accept it as part of the culture. As a result, the shamans who react to the expectations of the tourists about what is authentic attract the most people. I have observed a certain shaman adjust her attitude according to the group she had on a particular night. She would remove the Christian images and symbols from the ceremonial space when she realized they were offensive to some visitors and put them back when she had groups of Peruvians coming to ceremony. She would also try to distance herself from institutionalized Christianity for the sake of the tourists and openly criticize the Christian church. Curanderos will also decorate ceremonial spaces with indigenous handicrafts bought at the market.

To be fair, not all local curanderos partake in this performance of “authenticity”. Some will only do it for ceremony to create a more “sacred” mood, while others, as in the case of the conference, will dress up to appear more authentic or attractive to potential clients. However there is an increasing number of curanderos who are critical of this trend and will refuse to dress up and insist on

wearing Western clothing at all times. Those are few but it is clear that they want to differentiate themselves from the rest and maintain some sort of integrity. I was surprised to see that in one of the most well known ayahuasca retreats near Iquitos the maestro and apprentices wore their regular clothes at all times and at no time did they try to appear more authentic. Even more surprisingly, guests did not seem to mind and I never heard anyone complain that they were not getting an authentic experience, which shows that tourists are not as superficial as they are thought to be.

Another issue that causes controversy, and for some might compromise authenticity, is the issue of payment of shamans. As has already been noted most shamans that work with tourists charge steep amounts for ceremonies. Many people are uneasy with this wondering whether someone should charge such amounts for spiritual knowledge. Wallis (2003) mentions similar critiques among Native Americans. Payment of various kinds is normal in the context of South American shamanism, so the fact itself should not be considered to compromise authenticity. Besides, these shamans live in a capitalist economy therefore they have to be rewarded monetarily. What is alarming though is that the more secure a shaman feels about their position in the market, the larger amounts they charge, which in turn creates hostility and resentment in local society. Tourists depending on their background and their financial situation will either consider expensive shamans as frauds who exploit indigenous knowledge, or they will consider the price fair for what they are receiving.

On the issue of interculturality, ayahuasca is perceived to provide access to

the “other”, in this case not a cultural other but a global, universal, timeless and even divine other. Many accounts stress the transcendence of time and space in ayahuasca experience and sometimes this translates into transcendence of cultural boundaries as well. Burroughs (1963) describes his visions as “a place where the unknown past and the emergent future meet in a vibrating soundless hum”. In the Psychoactivity III Conference—which I attended in Amsterdam in November 2002—which brought together diverse participants interested in ayahuasca, the view was expressed that westerners had every right to use it, since these powerful plants give access to universal knowledge and are there for all humanity to use. Characteristically an Ecuadorian shaman said that ayahuasca is “the universal science of the universe” (*la ciencia universal del universo*). Obviously, this concept of universality is a recurrent theme.

I hope that the preceding observations have showed how problematic the contact with the “other” can be. Chaumeil (1999) explores the ways indigenous and Western cultures relate to otherness through shamanism. He argues that the relationship with the other is ambivalent and depending on the familiarity with it, it can be perceived as supra human or sub-human. This expresses the spatial, social, political, technological, as well as the “ontological” distance between the self and the other. The other can be monstrous—because it represents values opposite to ours—or fascinating because it is mysterious and difficult to grasp. These “other” experiences, of course, embody historic experience. According to Gow (1992), ayahuasca shamanism in its present form is not as “authentic” (locally endogenous,

unchanging) as it is thought to be and is in fact a result of contact with the Western “other” in Western Amazonia and the relationships that developed through it.

This intercultural process would not have been possible without the contribution of certain individuals that serve as mediators. They play a vital role in bringing together Western seekers and Peruvian shamans. These mediators are usually westerners. A couple of the shamans I worked with were westerners who had apprenticed with local shamans and either led ceremonies on their own or accompanied their teacher in ceremony. There are quite a few westerners in Iquitos practicing shamanism. Some of them create their own business locally. They invest in some land, build a lodge and hire local shamans and staff. More recently westerners have acquired such preexisting establishments. These shamans have an advantage because they can communicate better with the tourists for two reasons: language, and the fact that they can convey certain concepts more easily to them. One notable example is the one of the shaman featured in National Geographic. These centers usually combine other healing methods with shamanism (such as visualization meditation) as well as offer shamanic *dietas* (see chapter 7).

In addition to these “gringo<sup>27</sup>” shamans there are a number of people who serve as mediators between local shamans and tourists. Even though some of them have been criticized for capitalizing on indigenous knowledge and for taking advantage of both healers and tourists, reality is much more complex than that. These mediators serve some important functions. Two of these mediators are Americans

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<sup>27</sup> Gringo means foreigner, especially from the United States.

and have become naturalized Peruvian citizens. One of them owns a restaurant for tourists and the other owns a travel office with his wife and earns money from mediating between healers and tourists. He also organizes the Amazonian Shamanism Conference since 2005. The first helps to bring together tourists that frequent his restaurant and ask for advice on who are the good shamans. He introduced me to one of the shamans with whom I worked and in cases like this he also gets part of the fee. The other mediator does more than introducing the tourists to the shamans, he usually works with a couple of shamans and he arranges everything for the tourists including bringing them to the site. He also owns a small piece of land near Iquitos where he had some facilities built that he usually makes available to people attending the conference for free and to others who want to do ceremonies but do not have a space for it. And let's not forget the role of the anthropologist in this story (myself) who often played the role of the translator between shamans and tourists and was at times considered the "expert" in local shamanism and whose advice and recommendations were often solicited.

### **The feminization of ayahuasca**

I will close this chapter with an example from my fieldwork that will illustrate the transformation of discourse that can occur when something like ayahuasca shamanism is appropriated by outsiders. I call the phenomenon I will discuss "feminization of ayahuasca", in my observations and interviews with Western users. Among my research population, ayahuasca was generally perceived



as a female and even motherly spirit. For example, the plant spirit was often described as being a “tough” but loving mother. Other qualities, traditionally related to femininity, were also attributed to ayahuasca. It was thought to develop intuition and connection to nature and all things spiritual and sacred.

This gendered perception of the plant spirit was complicated by the fact that not all shamans shared this viewpoint and the fact that Amazonian shamanism is heavily dominated by men and is considered to belong to the “male domain”. The fact that ayahuasca has been used and is still used in sorcery and sorcery related violence, such as shamanic warfare, further challenges this feminized view of ayahuasca. I started looking into this because at least one shaman and his apprentice during my fieldwork argued that the ayahuasca spirit is male and frequently shared stories of involvement in shamanic warfare. Even though I will be touching on several issues that warrant a deeper discussion, such as gender, only in passing, my goal here is to raise some very important questions about the way westerners perceive indigenous knowledge and culture.

Most of the ethnographies we have on Amazonian cultures, especially early ones, were written by men. Thus the perspective we have is a male one for two reasons. First, these ethnographers were focused on male activities, like hunting and warfare (that might have something to do with preconceived notions of the “savage” and popular culture perpetuates this notion). Second, the ethnographers’ gender no doubt posed limitations to how much access they had to women’s activities and women’s spheres of life. Thus, the image we have in the West through these

ethnographies is the image of glorifying of “Man the Hunter” and the undervaluing of “Woman the Gatherer”. Amazonian societies have also been portrayed as highly gendered and even segregated, overemphasizing gender differences and interpreting them from a Western perspective. An example of this male bias can be seen in the following quote

The famous Yurupari ceremony of the Tukanoans is an ancestor- communication ritual, the basis of a man’s tribal society and an adolescent male initiation rite. Its sacred bark trumpet, which calls the Yurupari spirit, is taboo to the sight of women; it symbolizes the forces to whom the ceremony is holy, favorably influencing fertility spirits, effecting cures of prevalent illnesses, and improving the male prestige and power over women. [Schultes and Hoffman 1992:123]

In traditional Amazonian shamanism ayahuasca had many uses that have been eclipsed today. Among different ethnic groups it was used in communal rituals of men, singing and dancing, for locating game animals and divination, in warfare and conflict, to see faraway places, and for healing by communicating with spirits. It was also important in native art, cosmology and ethnoastronomy, and in the Jaguar complex (Reichel-Dolmatoff 1975). Ayahuasca traditionally was consumed by shamans (who were mostly men) and by male members of the group. Because the ayahuasca experience is challenging, men learned bravery through taking ayahuasca (McCallum 2001), a quality they need since they hunt and kill (are warriors). Thus, women do not need to take ayahuasca since they do not do these things; in some ethnic groups if a woman wishes to try ayahuasca however, she can, as the case is among the Cashinawa.

I hope this has provided some background against which we can compare the

ways in which ayahuasca and Amazonian shamanism are perceived by Western participants. The vast majority of the shamans with whom I worked and the people I interviewed, referred to ayahuasca as a female entity. I observed the same pattern while browsing online discussion forums. For example, these are some things that people have said:

“She is a female energy; she is very strong, very powerful”

“I had a very beautiful experience with grandmother ayahuasca”

“La Madrecita is a Teacher”

“Lately, I’ve been thinking about how demanding yet nurturing she is. How she can scold you like a stern mother and soothe you to total bliss.”

“Meeting Mother Ayahuasca is an intense, immense experience that will change who you are.”

“Aya is the mother and Grandma, gentle and nurturing at times, and Kali-like at times when your ego needs to be cut down”

“When I met ayahuasca, she came to me as a young girl, not too much younger than me..... At other times though, she seemed like she had no gender, and just appeared as a voice without a form....just a presence...an essence.”

An issue that came up a lot during my fieldwork, and was seen as underlying sexism in indigenous shamanism was the exclusion of menstruating women from ceremonies. As much as I tried, I never got a consensus from shamans on the reasoning behind this prohibition. However, I did not confirm that this was because of sexism either. According to several ethnographies, women are more visible to spirits when they menstruate, therefore are in greater danger from spirit attacks, involving seduction, rape and jealousy from female spirits (Kensinger 1981).

Another perspective is that menstruating women both attract and repel the physical manifestation of spirits (McCallum 2001). One of the shamans with whom I worked said:

“The understanding is that the energetic scent of the menstruation is repugnant to medicine spirits. So they don’t want to come around. The medicine spirits don’t like gore, they don’t really like blood, they don’t like all the things that are traditionally, typically human. They don’t particularly like sex, they don’t like spices; they don’t like any of that stuff. Unless it’s energetically right for your body”.

In the following section of this dissertation I talk about the prevalence of sorcery and shamanic warfare among shamans and it seems that there is a backlash in the ayahuasca community against that. Amazonian shamanism is perceived as sexist and having undesirable traits all related to maleness. The reaction to this is to seek out female shamans that are few and far between in the area. A very recent development that I found was the creation of an ayahuasca retreat that specializes in female shamanism, honoring the “Divine Feminine” and working with “Female Energy”. When I asked them about their choice they responded:

“The reason we chose to work with female shamans exclusively is because traditionally Amazonian shamanism is a very male dominated domain and the ayahuasca machismo does not come from the heart and is very much ego driven. We just finished our first workshop with 30 participants and the feedback was mind-blowing! .... The participants are relatively experienced (worked with several other centers before) and said this was more than they ever dreamed of.”

This is what they state on their website<sup>28</sup>:

“Shamanic practices and the ancients from around the world have long revered the Mother (along and in balance with the Father) for millennia – the Earth, the

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<sup>28</sup> <http://www.templeofthewayoflight.org/>

Great Mother, Pachamama. It is believed by many scholars that it was the eruption of violence as perpetrated by the newer, male dominated cultures that obliterated the peaceful, earth honouring ways of Goddess worship and paved the way for the strong hold of Christianity and eventually the obliteration of the Goddess from religion, religious texts and teachings.

It became clear to us at the Temple that by offering ceremonies exclusively run by female healers – curanderas (working with Mother Ayahuasca, connecting to Mother Earth) that we would be connecting with Divine Feminine Energy. We believe that the spiritual awakening that we see all over the planet is an effect of the Divine Feminine being reborn in each of us again. As we were each starved from the Divine Feminine energy, it is now being craved from every angle.

Divine feminine energy is comprised of qualities such as love, understanding, compassion, nurturing, and helpfulness to others. It includes tenderness, gentleness, kindness and these are the qualities that we help you to reconnect with and are the true nature of the female Shipibo healers (onanya ainbobo) who hold ayahuasca ceremonies at the Temple of the Way of Light: ceremonies that are truly lead from the heart, not from the head.”

Many will find no problem with this type of statement, they might even find it empowering. The problem that many feminist scholars (Butler 1990) would find is that even with its good intentions this kind of discourse perpetuates stereotypes of gender dualism, not to mention that it promotes an essentialist discourse. In addition, it makes certain assumptions about the nature of indigenous shamanism that might be too simplistic.

If we look at indigenous discourse, things start to become more complex. First of all it is very important to remember that the ayahuasca brew consists of at least two plants, ayahuasca and chacruna. One of the shamans I worked with in Iquitos told me that ayahuasca is most definitely a male spirit, while the spirit of chacruna is female. This reflects the view of other ethnographies as well. For

example Bustos (2008) mentions that the ayahuasca spirit is perceived by the asháninka as male and the spirit of chacruna is female.

Feminist anthropologists (Geller and Stockett 2006) have discarded dualisms of gender and have moved to more nuanced analyses. It would be simplistic and imposing Western frameworks on indigenous worldviews, to assume that because women did not participate in shamanism they had less power or were less valued. Many Amazonian cultures have a division of labor based on egalitarian complementarity as argued by several scholars (McCallum 1989, 1990, Overing 1983-4, Santos-Granero 1986). In addition, many have mechanisms to ensure that nobody has more power over another person in the group, achieving this through very complex kinship systems and marriage arrangements. In reality, having any sort of authority comes with more responsibility than privilege—we should not forget the ambiguity of the shaman figure and the fact that shamans and others accused of sorcery have been killed in the past because of that (Brown 1985, 1989).

On the other hand if we look at Western history, for centuries associating “nature” and “spirit” with femininity has led to their marginalization and domination. However, I argue that this new kind of rhetoric that reverses this discourse, even though it attempts to bring such qualities to the mainstream and perceives them as positive, by promoting an unrealistic and romanticized view of indigenous knowledge and worldview, it creates the danger of their further marginalization. Some feminists have argued for the appropriation of such concepts and their empowerment, but the continuing gendering of the spirit world in the case of

ayahuasca, only reaffirms previous ideologies of gender of separate spheres and the obvious power relations between them—something that might not have been there or might even be a Western influence.

Given the fact that the ayahuasca brew consists of at least two plants that create the synergistic effect and that without the presence of both the brew would not be effective, it is safe to say that an approach that focuses more on the *complementarity* of the two genders might be closer to the indigenous worldview—something that has been adequately argued for Andean cultures. Even though women did not participate in ayahuasca ceremonies or become shamans in most Amazonian cultures, this should not immediately lead to the conclusion that women were not valued or were powerless. Looking more closely at Amazonian ethnographies shows that even the symbolism, myths and rituals that separate female and male spheres, actually reinforce the idea that men and women need each other to survive and cannot exist without one another. We also need to entertain the possibility that what is today perceived as machismo is a Western import. Thus, I propose a more nuanced interpretation, which does not only focus on the female component of the ayahuasca brew but on the *complementarity* of the two plant spirits, that will reveal not only the wisdom and complexity of indigenous knowledge and medicine but might as well provide us with a more nuanced framework to look at how gender is constructed.

## **PART II: The Dual Nature of Amazonian Shamanism: Healing and Sorcery**

“Ayahuasca is above all, a medicine—the great medicine”

—Schultes and Hofmann (1992:122)

“Ayahuasca no es droga. Ayahuasca es medicina.”

—Norma Panduro

The above sentiment was expressed by the majority of my consultants, since ayahuasca was rarely referred to by its name; rather it was referred to as “medicine” or “medicina”. Early in my fieldwork I noticed that the more experienced ayahuasca users would call ayahuasca “the medicine”. The second quote above is from a ceremony during which a female participant who was having a scary vision kept shouting “ayahuasca es una droga!” She described that she was with the plants, which would not let her go and that she wanted to leave that world and stop having hallucinations. The shaman who led the ceremony kept repeating to her that ayahuasca is not a drug but a medicine and made her repeat it, but had little success in calming her down. Even though on the next morning she seemed much better, this anecdote highlights the ambivalent feelings with which people sometimes approach ayahuasca. In another ceremony, at a different location, one of the participants did a surprising improvisation at the end of the ceremony when everyone was sharing



what the ceremony had been like for them. His improvised song went something like this: “medicine, medicine, poison, poison”, once more emphasizing this ambivalence.

Taking a closer look at indigenous Amazonian Shamanism reveals a similar ambivalent picture. Before the recent increase in shamans as a result of the increase of Western interest in ayahuasca shamanism, ethnographers had observed a decline of shamanism in Northwest Amazonia. This decline has been attributed to the contact with outsiders and the suppression by Catholic missionaries. Even though it is true that Catholic missions opposed shamanism and Indian religion in general, the truth is much more complex than that. It has been argued (Gow 1992) that traditional ayahuasca shamanism has been transformed by urban influences, the most recent of these influences being ayahuasca tourism. However some elements remain prominent the most important of these being the dual nature of Amazonian shamanism and its inherent ambivalence when it comes to power and its source. In addition, as it has been argued by others as well (Lepowsky 1993) sorcery reveals a lot about social relations, in this case possible social tensions. In the following section I will explore some of the elements of Amazonian shamanism found in ethnographies and will show that in the indigenous context, healing was not central, but might have gained importance later through contact with outsiders. The focus on healing that I observed during my fieldwork can only be seen as a continuation of this trend already discussed by others.

Although many hallucinogens are used most widely for religious purposes,

ayahuasca, as discussed in the introduction, seems to penetrate all aspects of the lives of the indigenous cultures that use it. In indigenous Amazonian cultures ayahuasca is very important in maintaining social order and in interpreting daily life events. It is used in divination, healing, sorcery, hunting and even warfare. Indigenous shamanism differs from the type of shamanism practiced in cities like Iquitos, in that, at least on the surface<sup>29</sup>, shamanism in the latter context is not essential for the functioning of society. Rather, it has become a profession, wherein shamans do not perform essential rituals for the community, but serve mainly as healers. In addition, it is a profession of low value—not respected by everyone in the community. By looking at the ethnographic literature we can quickly see that this ambivalence of the shaman figure is not unique to the Iquitos milieu.

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<sup>29</sup> See Beyer 2009, p.138-142, for a discussion on the function of sorcery.

## **Chapter 4: Ambivalence as an element of Amazonian Shamanism**

It is important as others have shown (McCallum 1996) to depart from and deconstruct Western dichotomies such as nature–culture, body–spirit, and mind–matter when discussing Amazonian cultures. While dualisms exist in Amazonian cultures they should not be perceived as dichotomous but as “dynamic, expansive, and centrifugal” (McCallum 1996:364). Therefore it is important to see the healer and the sorcerer as part of the same system.

Before the coming of Europeans to the Amazon, shamanism played a central role in the social life of the indigenous people of the area. Today it continues to play an important role even though its form and significance have changed through the work of missionaries as well as acculturation of indigenous cultures. Plants, especially mind altering ones, played and continue to play a central role in Amazonian shamanism, ayahuasca being one of the most prominent ones. Since indigenous people did not possess a writing system and culture was transmitted orally, our most recent written sources are the reports of the first travelers, missionaries and scientists—such as botanists—in the area, the myths of the indigenous people themselves and later ethnographic reports. In this section I will review some of the literature paying particular attention to the inherent ambivalence of Amazonian shamanism.

Most ethnographies treat ayahuasca shamanism “as part of an unbroken pre-Columbian tradition” (Gow 1992:90) and ayahuasca shamanism is seen as completely integrated within the traditional culture. In Western Amazonia today,

healing is at the center of ayahuasca shamanism. However, according to Gow (1992), this is a development that is relatively recent and it is a result of contact with westerners since the rubber boom period and the economic relations that resulted from it<sup>30</sup>. It was developed in the new jungle urban centers, which were established by Jesuit and Franciscan missions in the area. He bases this on the fact that indigenous peoples that did not have direct contact with outsiders—such as the Sharanahua, Cashinahua, Culina, and Harakmbut—“use ayahuasca, but in very different contexts from that of ayahuasca shamanism” (Gow 1992:110).

Hugh-Jones (1994), when discussing shamanism among indigenous groups, distinguishes between vertical and horizontal shamanism. The major component of the former is esoteric knowledge that is transmitted within a small elite while the latter is more democratic and involves the classic shamanistic features of trance and possession. Among the Bororo and the Arawakan and Tukanoan groups of Northwestern Amazonia, both types of shamanism coexist and are in fact complementary by being linked to antithetical cosmological and sociological principles. This also creates the potential for conflict and strife between the two.

Vertical shamanism appears in more complex, ranked societies where the secular and ritual powers are merged. These shamans are more similar to priests and are morally unambiguous figures. Hallucinogens are rarely used in this form of shamanism—the shamans use only tobacco and chanting. Their knowledge consists mainly of the mythology and is esoteric. They must have exhaustive and accurate

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<sup>30</sup> See introduction for an account of the effects of the rubber boom in the area.

knowledge and because of the time it takes to acquire this knowledge, shamans of this type are elders. Their selection happens at birth and training starts very early (Hugh-Jones 1994).

Horizontal shamanism, which is closer to the type of shamanism practiced in Iquitos today, appears more in egalitarian societies with an emphasis in warfare and hunting. In these societies secular power is separated from religious power and the shamans are ambiguous figures. Hallucinogens are used freely and this type of shamanism is open to all adult men and in some cases women. The shamans receive their power and knowledge from the spirits through possession and trance. Their powers are graded and the most powerful are considered to be the Jaguar shamans (Reichel-Dolmatoff 1972, 1976), who use powerful hallucinogenic snuffs and ayahuasca. These shamans were feared and often accused of sorcery by their rivals and played an important role in warfare. In most areas they are considered to be extinct.

Historically horizontal shamans were behind the emergence of millennial cults in Amazonia. They were the result of a complex set of factors, including colonialism as well as previous internal conflicts. Since the decline of millennialism, jaguar shamanism's importance has declined throughout the region (Hugh-Jones 1994). In addition, missionaries campaigned against Indian religion and especially shamans because they were effectively competing for the position of the legitimate representatives of the supernatural powers. But in areas the millennialism persisted, like the Arawakan area, jaguar shamanism is more developed and jaguar shamans are

to be found until today (Hugh-Jones 1994). Another factor for this difference is that in the areas where Catholic missions were established and were therefore exposed to direct missionary presence, shamanism declined and ancestor cults were abandoned.

### **Tobacco**

Tobacco, a plant vilified in Western cultures, is probably the most important plant in South American shamanism and one that contributes to its ambivalence. Fausto notes the absence of tobacco in “neoshamanic sites and rites” (2004:158). Tobacco, from the species *Nicotiana rustica*, was ever present in the ceremonies I observed, its spirit was considered extremely powerful, even though some healers might consider its spirit “heavy” and will not “diet” it. However, one of my consultants who was an apprentice, told me that if someone wants to be a shaman, they have to be willing to smoke several mapacho<sup>31</sup> cigarettes during the ceremony, even if they do not normally smoke. In every ceremony there were large bundles of mapacho cigarettes close to the shaman. The cigarettes can be purchased rolled at the Iquitos market. Tobacco smoke is blown on the ritual objects, including the ayahuasca bottle, blown to cleanse the ritual space and to cleanse and protect the participants.

The best known study that focuses on the ritual use of tobacco and its importance is the one by Johannes Wilbert (1972, 1975, and 1987). The ritual aspect has to be stressed, since traditionally tobacco use in these societies was never

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<sup>31</sup> Mapacho is the name used for *Nicotiana rustica* in the area.

recreational but always consumed in the context of a shamanic ceremony. In fact, nicotine, in appropriate dosages, is particularly well suited to produce in the shaman the chemical changes that activate the attack behavior of his jaguar-self (Wilbert 1987:197). Today of course it is also consumed recreationally by locals in the form of cigarettes, the cost of buying them being the only deterrent. Tobacco is an important agent of the Jaguar shaman transformation complex of Amazonian shamanism, but nicotine is often considered of lesser significance than hallucinogenic compounds. In Campa shamanism however, it is the most important hallucinogen in high doses (Weiss 1973:43). The Campa word for shaman is *sheripiári*, which contains the root *sheri*, which means tobacco. The Matsigenka word for shaman is *seripi'gari*, which can be translated as “the one intoxicated by tobacco” (Baer 1987:73).

Tobacco is not only used as a hallucinogen. Karsten reports that the Shuar ingest tobacco for three major reasons (1964:94): as a universal remedy for all sorts of illnesses, as a prophylactic to strengthen the body and as a narcotic to induce dreams.

Tobacco is used in shamanic initiations in order to experience symbolic death; it is believed that nicotine is exceptionally well suited to manifest the continuum of dying. Mentally, it is experienced as a journey of the soul outside the body; along the celestial road the soul of the person in trance repeatedly encounters and escapes death (Wilbert 1987:159). Among the Ayoreo of the north Chaco (Paraguay and Bolivia) it is said that the apprentice will drink nearly a liter of

pulverized green tobacco and will fall into a coma (Califano et al. 1987:122). If he survives he becomes a shaman. Shipibo apprentices will also ingest great quantities of tobacco water in order to acquire their powers. The Shipibo also use a variety of ingestion techniques such as chewing, drinking, smoking, snuffing and enema (Wilbert 1987:130, 47). Wilbert mentions six indigenous groups that use four or more ingestion techniques: Campa, Jivaro, Piro, Matsigena, Shipibo and Tucuna. All of these groups also consume Ayahuasca in a ceremonial context.

Additionally, tobacco is used in order to induce visions. The mention of visions following tobacco use is very frequent in literature. As to the nature of the things seen, authors make occasional reference to the spirits, ancestors, demons, lightning, flashes, and a giant sun. Auditory hallucinations occurring simultaneously with visions include chanting and verbal messages. Unquestionably, however, tobacco ingestion is capable of provoking intense visionary experiences and of providing eschatological scenarios on a grand scale. Tobacco is also experienced as a sight-and-vision-altering drug that permits the tobacco shaman to view the spiritual world (Wilbert 1987:164-165).

### **Knowledge and power**

In Amazonian shamanism the special power of the hallucinogenic plants is not attributed to alkaloids but to the spirit believed to inhabit every plant, something which is encountered in other cultures as well (Furst 1993; Whitten 1976). Plants are believed to be the teachers of shamans (Luna 1984, 1986), even though learning



from the plants does not imply that the person will become a healer. For some, this process is more a philosophical quest, the desire to learn, to understand; learning how to heal is part of the knowledge acquired during initiation, not the primary goal. Ayahuasca, like the other plant teachers, is used to explore this world and the other worlds which are not normally accessible to people (Luna 1986:152). In Siona there are three classes of men, along the scale of knowledge: “only a man”, “one who has left” and “seer” (Langdon 1992); the last one of course being the shaman. At each stage of knowledge, the individual is expected to go through a set of culturally anticipated visions. In the traditional setting, the ayahuasca experience is not one of individual random visions or free association of the unconscious while under the drug’s influence. It is, rather, an ordering of the induced visions into culturally meaningful symbols and experiences, thus gaining increasing control over the visions and events occurring (Langdon 1992:53). The culturally anticipated visions do not come automatically or without suffering and often the first visions are dominated by a pervasive fear of death and destruction.

There is a very strong relationship between seeing, knowing and power in the literature on Amazonian shamanism. In the traditional Amerindian context, an intimate affinity between the three is encountered. As reported by Langdon and Baer (1992), the Siona Indians consider “seeing” to be the major characteristic of high-level ayahuasqueros. Further, in the practice of ayahuasca healing, the ayahuasca is said to enable the healer to see the inner parts of his patient and thus establish a diagnosis. This issue is also discussed by Chaumeil (1998), who stresses the

importance of vision, of things unknown provided by ayahuasca, in the acquisition of knowledge and consequently of power. Even today, some of the shamans I interviewed reported that the brew literally enables them to see the inside of their patients' bodies. One shaman after a ceremony described to me what he had seen in my body as wounds (heridas) on particular organs.

McCallum has stressed the relationship between knowledge and health, showing on the one hand that among the Cashinahua the same substances and experiences that can be transformed into knowledge may also become illness-causing agents, and on the other hand that "illness can be understood as *a disturbance in the body's capacity to know*" (McCallum 1996:363).

According to Langdon (1979a, 1979b, 1992) and Chaumeil (1998), increased shamanic knowledge is increased power. The more experience they have with hallucinogenic trance states and the more intense the hallucinogenic agent is, the more power they are believed to have. The shaman's power is locatable, it resides in his body and it can take the form of different things, usually darts and phlegm. The sources from where shamans appropriate their power are ambivalent—they have the power to heal as well as harm. As Greene puts it "the power source is raw, socially unformed, and thus ambivalent. Its moral and political (that is, social) direction is determined by the moral and political action of the social (shaman) or antisocial (sorcerer) agent" (1998:651). This was verified by one of my consultants who was a very powerful shaman and very respected in the area of Iquitos.

Power and prestige in shamanism comes from a variety of sources. Besides

acquiring power from the spirits, shamans might appropriate much of their shamanic power from Western sources such as biomedicine (Greene 1998, Taylor 1981). Shamanic power always comes from without the social milieu, either from the spirit world or from other cultural milieus. Shamans are traditionally mediators between the world of the living and the world of the spirits and the larger universe. Harner argues that, “the ability of the master shaman to operate successfully in two different realities is seen as evidence of power” (1980:46). Shamans as mediators channel this power from the socially distant to the socially near. For shamans to have traveled far is an important credential, since travel is a way to acquire knowledge. Most shamans in Iquitos claim to have been taught by some teacher far away, usually a native of one of the many indigenous groups of the Peruvian Amazon. Pucallpa and the surrounding area seems to be considered a place with a plethora of powerful shamans—even though it does not attract as many tourists due to it offering fewer conveniences. Today this has taken another form. Shamans have adopted Western vocabulary to approach their audience, as well as vocabulary and concepts from the eastern philosophies, such as Buddhism, yoga etc.. For example one of the shamans I worked with often spoke of the chakras—or energy centers—on the human body, a concept that many westerners are familiar with from yoga.

It is important to stress that even though indigenous people are discriminated against, urban “shamans stress that their knowledge comes from forest Indians” (Gow 1992:96) and they attribute special powers to them. Mestizos interact with indigenous people to acquire their knowledge of hallucinogens, as in the example of

Don Augustin Rivas whose experiences are described in the book *Amazon Magic* (Bear 2000). Several of the shamans in Iquitos also claimed that they apprenticed with an indigenous shaman, one with whom I worked closely said that she apprenticed with a Shipibo shaman in the area of Pucallpa. But those same mestizos who have appropriated ayahuasca have contempt for the Indians themselves as inferior and “savage”. The aforementioned shaman was known to have claimed in a meeting on traditional medical knowledge that Indians were too unsophisticated to know what to do with the knowledge they had.

Langdon wrote that power is the key concept that links shamanic systems, enabling shamans to mediate between “the human and the extrahuman” (1992:13). She also conceded that shamans have an “ambiguous position in society” (Langdon 1992:14) because they may employ power in negative ways, especially when they direct it against enemies outside of their social group. Nevertheless, she does not focus on this and argues that shamanic power is usually manifested “in public ritual for the benefit of the community or for individuals” (Langdon 1992:14).

### **Animals**

Animals are of the utmost importance in the life of Amazonian inhabitants and play a central role in the mythology of the peoples of the area. Animal spirits also appear in neoshamanism as allies and helpers. In some cases—such as the Shipibo—animals are perceived to be reincarnated humans, who were transformed to animals because of misconducts and mistakes that they did in their human lives.

Humans can actually see the true human form of animals through ayahuasca intoxication (Baer 1987:77). The most important animal in Amazonian shamanism is the Jaguar (Harner 1973, Reichel-Dolmatoff 1975). The ability of shamans to transform into jaguars, the most predatory animal in the jungle, was recorded early, and the centrality of predation in shamanism has been discussed by Fausto (2004). Among the Asurini do Tocantins to be a shaman implies to eat like a Jaguar (Andrade 1992). Among the Parakana the main way to develop shamanic abilities is to follow the way of the jaguar; that is to be a predator (Fausto 2004).

Shamans can not only transform into jaguars but can also become one after their death. During the ecstatic journeys of shamans, jaguars serve as companions, guards, defenders, as well as weapons against enemy spirits and shamans. It is only logical that the jaguar was chosen for these functions because of its strength, elegance, speed and dangerousness. This symbiotic relationship between shamans and jaguars is obvious in some indigenous languages where the same word is used for shaman and jaguar—as in the West Tucano where the word yai or dyai means at the same time shaman and jaguar (Furst 1976:48). In the Iquitos area most shamans would report that they had a spirit animal or affine that they could transform into, but they were rarely jungle animals. One of the shamans I worked with was known to transform into a peacock and another into an eagle. Ceremony participants also reported having seen them in their animal form during ceremonies.

### **Ambivalence**

Devereux (1969) was one of the first scholars to capture the dark side of shamanism and warned that shamanic power can easily turn from healing into killing power. This ambivalence of shamans has been best discussed by Michael Taussig (1987). He argues that shamans gain their curative powers by creating a space of terror and death. They use ayahuasca to place themselves and their clients in a chaotic and carnivalesque realm and push experience to the limits of signification. Ayahuasca shamanism joins destruction to healing and the disruption of structured meaning allows for meaningful actions across cultural lines. By willfully immersing themselves in this play of creation and destruction shamans are able to perform. According to many ethnographers, traditionally it is not uncommon for shamans to engage in shamanic rivalries, wars, and duplicity (e.g., Hugh-Jones, 1994:32-37). Indeed, Chaumeil (1998) demonstrates the parallels between shamanism and warfare as well as shamanism and hunting, among the Yagua. He asserts the ambivalent character of Yagua shamanism in saying that all shamans are at the same time healers and aggressors (Chaumeil 1998:330). In fact they use the same word – *nowónu* – for a sickness or bad hunt and for a healing or successful hunt (Chaumeil 1998:75).

Brown noted that “Shaman and sorcerer might seem locked in a simple struggle of good against evil, order against chaos, but things are not so straightforward. Shamans and sorcerers gain their power from the same source” (1989:8). Because shamans possess the power to kill, Brown continued, “the

boundary between sorcerer and shaman is sometimes indistinct” (1989:8). This is how he recounts the event that changed his perspective on shamanism: “The ambiguities of the shaman’s role were brought home to me during a healing session I attended in Yankush’s house” (Brown 1989:8). The clients were two women, exhibiting symptoms that raised suspicions of sorcery involved. Yankush drank ayahuasca at nightfall and as his “intoxication increased . . . he sucked noisily on the patients’ bodies in an effort to remove the darts” (10). Later, a woman called out, “If there are any darts there when she gets back home, they may say that Yankush put them there. So take them all out!” (10). According to Brown, this

statement was an unusually blunt rendering of an ambivalence implicit in all relations between Aguaruna shamans and their clients. Because shamans control spirit darts, people fear that a shaman may be tempted to use the cover of healing as an opportunity to bewitch his own clients for personal reasons. The clients therefore remind the shamans that they expect results—and if such results are not forthcoming, the shaman himself may be suspected of, and punished for, sorcery. [Brown 1989:10]

Indigenous shamanism differs from the type of shamanism practiced in cities like Iquitos, in that, at least on the surface<sup>32</sup>, shamanism in the latter context is not essential for the functioning of society. Rather, it has become a profession, wherein shamans do not perform essential rituals for the community, but serve mainly as healers. It has also been argued that today sorcery has replaced physical aggression that has declined with colonialism (Lepowsky 1993). Tourism greatly contributes to the focus on healing in shamanism in the Iquitos milieu, since healing is one of the main motivations of Western participants in ayahuasca ceremonies. However, the

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<sup>32</sup> See Beyer 2009, p.138-142, for a discussion on the function of sorcery.

idea that contact with outside forces has contributed to this shift might not be so novel. Indeed, it has been argued that “ayahuasca shamanism” evolved to cure the disease of Western Amazonian colonial experience” (Gow 1992:111). This shamanism revolves more around healing and dealing with the problems that stem from living in an urban environment. Urban dwellers utilize it to make sense of this new environment and the new difficulties that come from their incorporation to the market economy. As Taussig (1987) describes these difficulties are perceived as due to invisible actions and desires of fellow humans such as envy. Ayahuasca in this case is employed to counter these invisible forces.

In Amazonia as well as in Melanesia, social life is based on an ethic of sharing and cooperation, people depend on each other for subsistence and all difficulties are believed to be the result of malevolent action by someone (Lepowsky 1993). Today envy as well as sexual jealousy, are the most common motives for sorcery. Belief in sorcery “allows the victims at least the possibility of attempting countermeasures against the perpetrators” (Lepowsky 1993:176). Lepowsky sees sorcery beliefs as “social equalizers ensuring that people of all ages and both sexes receive the respect of others” (1993:201). While some anthropologists have pointed out that such beliefs and accusations might exacerbate social conflict (Lepowsky 1993) if we take into account that the most common motives are envy, they might also be a way to keep people in check, humble, reduce the chances that they will cause the envy of others and everyone will treat others fairly.

Brown (1989) has remarked on the recent tendency of both academics and



the public to focus only on the positive and healing aspects of shamanism. This trend, perhaps a reflection of the influence of neoshamanism, might be the result of imposing Western morality on non-Western cultures. Western cultures, for example, make a clear distinction between good and bad and light and dark (Fausto 2004). However, numerous scholars have noted that there is no such clear distinction in Amazonian shamanism, “which thrives on ambivalence” (Fausto 2004:172). In fact, recent publications have focused on this very ambivalence and emphasize the darker elements of shamanism (Whitehead and Wright 2004; Beyer 2009).

Ethnographic evidence from all over Amazonia reveals the dual nature of shamanism. While some scholars only allude to its dark side and focus on aspects of healing (Dobkin de Rios 1972; Langdon 1992; Sullivan 1988), others have focused more explicitly on its inherent ambivalence (Harner 1972; Whitten 1976; Goldman 1963; Taussig 1987; Hugh-Jones 1994; Brown 1985, 1986, 1989; Chaumeil 1983). Buchillet (1990) argues that this ambivalence obeys the internal logic of the construction of shamanic knowledge.

Hugh-Jones (1996:35) indicates that the ambivalence of shamanism has been described as either sociopolitical, when shamans use their powers to harm enemies on the one hand and cure members of their own group on the other, or as the product of apprenticeship, in the case of those shamans who fail to exercise self-control and master their emotions or aggressive desires, thereby becoming sorcerers. As one of my consultants warned me during my fieldwork, shamanic powers entail a certain risk. Not only must all shamans contend with the fact that certain spirits ask them to

commit harmful actions in return for their healing powers, but novice shamans also frequently experience, and must learn to control, their own urges to harm or kill (Perruchon 2003; Beyer 2009). As I was constantly reminded in the field, being a sorcerer is much easier than being a healer, since being a healer requires being able to control these urges to harm.

From the above discussion it is obvious that diagnosing and healing was only one among many ayahuasca uses in indigenous Amerindian societies. We see a greater focus on healing when we look at studies that look at more urban populations or among indigenous peoples in more recent times (Chaumeil 1998). For example, Dobkin de Rios suggests that many of the patients at jungle ayahuasca sessions go (in the language of Western medicine) “for psychiatric help”. She calls “drug healing in the Peruvian jungle a very old and honored tradition of dealing with psychological problems that predates Freudian analysis by centuries” (1972:130).

In the following two chapters I will discuss the concepts of healing and sorcery and their manifestations in the context of shamanic tourism. Anthropologists believe ayahuasca is most commonly used in cases of CBSs (culture-bound syndromes) such as the condition of soul loss. In the context of shamanic tourism it was thought to be able to cure a variety of illnesses including depression, cancer, and even AIDS. On the other hand, some shamans, known as *maleros* or *brujos*, are also known to employ ayahuasca in sorcery for the causing of illness as well, by summoning “spirit darts” that will attack their enemies causing *daño*.

## Chapter 5: Healing

The first pillar of Amazonian mestizo shamanism is healing. Not only is it one of the most commonly quoted motives for westerners for participating in ayahuasca ceremonies, but many elements of an ayahuasca ceremony are aimed to heal. In this section I will look at how healing was perceived by both shamans and clients in the context of Iquitos and the elements of an ayahuasca ceremony and how they are meant to achieve healing. I will look at the most important conceptions of health and disease in *curanderismo* as well as those of westerners' and how they converge in the context of shamanic tourism.

In many societies illness is attributed to a psycho-physiological disequilibrium in the human organism. This is no different in *curanderismo*, where the root of disease is located in the spiritual as well as social sphere. To treat illness the *curandero* employs different methods to heal the individual, such as prayers, icaros, massages, sucking, blowing, smoke, incense, oils, perfumes, plant essences. Often Peruvian externalizing explanatory models place the cause of a patient's problem outside of himself and treatment requires manipulation of forces external to the patient—at least in Western eyes they are external even though it could be argued that it is not necessarily so for the shamans. Sorcery or spirits are responsible and shamans manipulate these forces and treat external cosmological as well as social problems. As Lenaerts argues when discussing Asheninka 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).

Locals will not go to shamans for illness that is easily explained as a result of natural cause, flu, infection etc. In fact many people are knowledgeable enough to self medicate using plants. One has also the option of visiting the plant market to obtain a remedy or even the Western pharmacy. The only cases where locals would attend an ayahuasca ceremony to heal was when they were suffering 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).

I attended two ceremonies where locals participated to be healed. Both were lead by Western ayahuasqueros. The fact that locals would prefer to consult a westerner for this, might be because they felt safer with them and because this would minimize the chances that their condition would become known to the community. The first ceremony of this type that I observed was to heal a woman that was attacked by a brujo who was hired by another woman with whom her husband was having an affair. This is a very common occurrence and will be discussed further in the next chapter. The second case I observed was the case of a young woman who was dating a westerner and who had been feeling bad for a while. She attended a ceremony but did not ingest ayahuasca herself. The intention was to potentially find out the cause of her illness and perform a ritual cleansing and healing on her. The assumption was that there was some spiritual or magical cause for her malaise caused by a brujo. I was not able to follow up on this case as it happened mere days before the end of my fieldwork.

What seemed to draw a lot of westerners to shamanism as a more desirable healing tool was the fact that it addresses spiritual concerns, much like many alternative healing methods. Even though an increasing number of psychologists and even medical doctors in the West are starting to recognize the importance of the inclusion of spiritual concerns for a patient's 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. Other alternative healing methods were often combined with ayahuasca such as Reiki.

Many authors have pointed out the resemblance of shamanic techniques to certain psychotherapeutic techniques in our culture (Murphy 1960, Peters and Price-Williams 1980). First the initial call of shamans in many cultures is expressed as illness and their initiation becomes the cure of this illness. The so-called magical flight of shamans can be viewed as a psychotherapeutic device. By mastering it a shaman learns to "master himself i.e., become cured" (Peters and Price-Williams 1980:405). Peters and Price-Williams mention a number of psychological therapeutic methods that are similar to the shamanic magical flight such as "Jung's (1958[1916]) 'active imagination', Desoille's (1966) 'directed daydreams', Leuner's (1969) 'guided effective imagery', as well as a group of other therapies which make use of the patient's capacity to visually imagine" (Peters and Price-Williams 1980:405). Some therapists even use hypnosis. Soibelman mentions that in Brazil taking ayahuasca is very fashionable among therapists and is considered professionally helpful (1996). Peters and Price-Williams also underline the therapeutic potential of

shamanic states in general (1980:406).

Westerners tend to seek the source of their problems in themselves and in this healing paradigm the responsibility for healing is placed onto the individual. However they did recognize that some of their troubles might have originated because of societal influences and former life experiences, for example childhood trauma. However, 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 reacted to them. In ayahuasca they sought to detoxify themselves from the negative feelings that societal influences or childhood trauma might have caused in them.

What made ayahuasca particularly attractive to them was that it addresses the spiritual component of healing, as well as the physical; treating the whole person just like other alternative medicine methods. It is perceived that many diseases in the West come from a spiritual disconnect from nature, from other human beings and from archaic modes of thought and that ayahuasca could help them remedy this. One westerner who had just arrived to Iquitos seeking healing with a local shaman, 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”. She felt that she needed to fix that to be healed. The spiritual component of healing had larger ramifications for them; the belief that individual healing will then contribute to the collective healing of humanity was quite widespread. This way, by going to the jungle, drinking ayahuasca and working on their personal healing, they were working on the healing of humanity and the earth. Therefore, the transformation of the self and the paradigm

shift discussed in more detail in chapter seven is an integral part of that healing process.

This vocabulary has many similarities with that of the New Age as discussed by Pike, who states that one's own healing must come before healing the planet and other people (2004:92). Since biomedicine is perceived as limited, what is missing in Western healing practices is found in Asian and indigenous traditions. Another common belief in the New Age 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 said that humans create their own illness. On the other hand suffering and inner chaos are seen in a positive light since they provide opportunities for personal growth (Pike 2004:100). In healing narratives there is often a crisis before the journey (110). Other important elements are: that the ultimate responsibility for health is back to the individual (109); the centrality of self-knowledge and the inner realms of the self are the focus of healing work. Finally, many healing stories describe pulling apart the self and putting it back together (111).

Here is the story of one of the Peruvian shamans I interviewed, which contains some of the above elements. In addition, her account is very subversive and challenges authority and power. She got sick when she was 17 but the doctors could not find anything wrong with her. When she got sick her family lived in a small town and her mother took her to a shaman. She took ayahuasca and the first few times she saw monsters attacking her. Later she realized that she was the monsters and that she was the one that was hurting herself. She thinks that this is the case most of the time

with illness; that people are the ones to make themselves sick as well as heal themselves. She explained that it is not the shaman that does the healing but the patient's faith in them. She said that faith is very important; if someone believes in the healer they go to, they get healed. However, it is not the shaman who does the healing but the patient. She told me a story about a curandero on the coast that people respected and trusted a lot. People went to him for every little thing and he gave them medicine. When they interviewed him about what he gives to the people, he said that he gives everyone the same thing; this confirmed to her that it is people's faith that heals them. When she had a falling out with her maestro it was because he had a big ego. He said that he had powers and could cure people, but she disagreed with that. She believed that there is nothing supernatural about ayahuasca and for her, there are no secrets. It is something that is accessible to everyone because everyone has a shaman inside and they have the ability to heal themselves. She disagrees with shamans who say the opposite—according to her observations these are usually male shamans. She thinks their beliefs are a result of patriarchy and in reality there is no specialist and no authority. The power is in the plants and not the shamans. She considered herself a beginner even though she had been practicing for 12 years at the time of the interview. She lets everyone participate in the ritual for that reason. She does not assume the role of the expert but merely guides the ceremony. She added that westerners are not looking for an expert to follow.

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



shamans 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 seen benefits from it. However, she 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 cure anything, from cancer to a fragmented soul. What is important to note here though is, that according to this model, the physical is seen as intertwined to the psychological and the spiritual and not as separate realms.

Among my interviewees the vast majority of participants did not pursue ayahuasca for healing, at least not to heal some specific ailment. The most commonly quoted motive was curiosity. The majority of participants did not report a health or physical benefit. However even among the people whose primary motive was not healing, some physical and psychological benefits have been reported. The people who were motivated by physical or psychological healing resorted to ayahuasca for problems that they have not been able to deal with biomedicine and conventional psychotherapy.

These are some of the benefits that consultants recounted in interviews: cleansing; improved nerve problem on arm; headaches disappeared but came back after a month; reduction of pylonidal cyst swelling; improved general well-being; helped with depression to the point where no more medication was needed; no heart medication during the time in Iquitos (no follow up); improved self-esteem; changed outlook on life; positive outlook; mental calm; realized things that would have taken

longer to realize or years of therapy; problems with sexual abuse from childhood and intimacy were solved.

Some of the fundamental elements that will be discussed in the next pages are the idea of cleansing, energy and self love. Ayahuasca is called *la purga* for the laxative and emetic effects it has that are considered an important element of healing. Cleansing also includes the removal of entities from the participants' bodies during ceremony, negative energies that are perceived to "posses" the person. Energy was very important and "straightening" it was a major goal. I will also discuss what can "cross" or "tangle" a person's energy. The intention of a shaman was also quoted as important since they are responsible for protecting the ritual space and making sure the patients have the best experience. A good ayahuasquero should always have the intention to protect and heal. The ritual happens in an invisible circle that the ayahuasquero must keep protected at all times.

### **Elements of Healing in an Ayahuasca Ceremony**

There are certain ceremonial elements that can be found throughout the area and are meant to either contribute to healing or protection in an ayahuasca ceremony. No matter how healing was perceived, most rituals I attended centered on the theme of healing, whether it was physical, psychological or spiritual or all of these. Most ceremonies with Western participants would focus on psychological and spiritual healing and growth. Sometimes there was a participant or two who required special attention because they were trying to heal something major, while other times there

was an underlying intent to heal. In the next pages I will describe the elements of an ayahuasca ceremony, starting with the physical objects or tools of shamans and moving on to more abstract concepts.

Evidently, ayahuasca is the first element and the one that everything else revolves around. 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 since there is no consistent evidence that supports this apart from anecdotal reports. Even though there is indication that ayahuasca contains alkaloids that help with anxiety and depression (Santos et al. 2007), it is important that more research is done in this respect to determine whether there are certain alkaloids in the plant mixture that would prove beneficial for other conditions.

Dosage of the brew varies among shamans. Most would say that they administered the dosage that the spirits would indicate. Only one shaman said that she had a standard dose of 50ml that she gave to everyone unless they had no effect with this dose. She would offer another dose later in the ceremony as well to those who wanted it. One shaman had three different bottles of ayahuasca in front of her and she mixed from all three of them in every glass she served. Later she told me that the ayahuasca in the three bottles was from different batches. Instead of mixing them all in one bottle like other ayahuasqueros do she does it on the spot. She said that she just likes doing it—there is no particular reason for doing it this way. She said

that she tries the ayahuasca from each batch before she gives it to people and when she knows them, she gets a feeling which one to give them. She also gives them different quantities and she has two different size glasses for this purpose. With new people she asks them how sensitive they are and usually gives them a small dose initially before she feels it is safe to give them more.

Vegetalismo is known as the art of knowing all the plants and their curing powers. However, outside of the plants that they added to the brew, most of the ayahuasqueros I worked with did not make extensive use of plants to heal patients. It is generally believed that invoking the spirit plants and their energy in ceremony is enough to heal and the physical plant is not necessary. One curandera used a set number of plants during the time I was there for a variety of issues or ailments—including to treat drug addiction—one of them being piri piri (*Cyperus articulatus*). She and others used a variety of aromatic plants and flowers in *baños de flores* (flower baths) that were administered before ayahuasca ceremonies, usually during the day. 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. These baths were meant to cleanse the body and protect it from sorcery.

Over time I came to realize that many locals had a rather extensive knowledge of plants they could use for everyday situations and issues they had. For example I could consult with a friend of mine about an issue I had and she would always recommend some plant that I could find on the market. Also the plant

medicine section at the market of Belén in Iquitos has a great variety of plants in all forms, from fresh to plants preserved in alcohol, potions for love magic etc.

Ayahuasca is even sold there in prepared form. It is quite possible for someone to go to the market and consult with one of the vendors about a problem they have and receive a plant remedy. I have on several occasions translated for friends and acquaintances in this situation. Lenaerts (2006) when discussing the Asheninka argues that a shaman is not necessarily a good botanist. His 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.

*Mapacho*<sup>33</sup> is used throughout the region during the preparation of the brew as well as during the ceremony. It is considered a very powerful spirit and one of my consultants told me, pointing to the bundle of mapacho cigarettes that he had lined up for ceremony, that one cannot be a shaman if he or she is 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 in order 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 a shaman blows smoke in the four directions for protection and to establish the ceremonial space. During the ceremony it is blown on the bottle of ayahuasca, each individual cup serving of the brew, as well as on ceremonial objects and participants.

There are several things that might be passed around in ceremony for people

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<sup>33</sup> Tobacco from the *Nicotiana rustica* plant.

to apply on their bodies for extra protection and cleansing. One of them is *Agua Florida*, or *Agua de Florida* (literally flowered water), which is used by almost all the curanderos I worked with in the area. It is cheap cologne that can be bought at the market of Belén in plastic bottles usually of the brand Murray and Lanman. It is used on the body of the shaman, usually the neck, face and arms, at the beginning of the ceremony for protection and then it is passed to all the participants and applied to their body with the same intent. Plastic bottles with items preserved in *aguardiente*<sup>34</sup> 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 curanderos use certain types of onions and garlic, preserved in *aguardiente*, the same way. They will hold a small amount of the *aguardiente* 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 *Palo Santo* tree, *Bursera graveolens* or *Bursera microphylla* (Rätsch 2006). It can be bought at the market in small pieces and can be burned individually or in a bowl 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

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<sup>34</sup> Sugarcane liquor.

by one shaman who also used essential oils, while other times I have seen it brought by some of the participants.

The *schacapa* is another very important 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 a much more important shamanic instrument. It is used to direct energy to where it is needed or to remove negative energy from the patient's body. Only one curandero and his apprentice did not use the *schacapa* in their ceremonies that I attended. Instead they used a bundle of leaves from the *ruda*<sup>35</sup> plant. It is used in the exact same way as the other *schacapa* but it is not as noisy and has a discreet and pleasant smell. I was told that they preferred to use *ruda* because it has the ability to absorb any negative energies from the patient. I have seen both being used in ceremony in similar ways. While the shaman sings he or she shakes the *schacapa* producing a monotonous sound that accompanies the *icaros*, while when he or she does an individual healing on someone they tap their 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 shamans and there are several *schacapas* used at the same time the effect can also be very impressive.

Most of the curanderos I worked with do not use other instruments in their ceremonies but some have started to include them. One of the European shamans I

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<sup>35</sup> 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.

worked with used to play the flute toward the end of the ceremony as well as using a bell. In another ceremony that I observed lead by an apprentice of a different shaman, who did not observe the exact protocol of his teacher's ceremony, there were other instruments allowed to be played by the participants toward the end of the ceremony. In another ceremony, someone brought a didgeridoo which he played after the ceremony was closed. One of the shamans I worked with closely, also used a rain stick which made a very impressive sound during ayahuasca ceremonies. Only one shaman did not use a Schacapa at all. She used other instruments, panpipes, rattles and a drum, but toward the end of the ceremony.

One of the curanderos also used magical stones, known as *encantos or pedernales*, in his ceremonies. Along with his other ceremonial objects he had a stone that was given to him a long time ago which was supposed to absorb disease and negative energies. I never witnessed a healing with this stone because there was no need for it in the ceremonies that I attended. His female apprentice also had a stone, a smaller one that she used to treat patients. These stones are believed to contain *genios* (spirits) just like plants and animals. This shaman told me that he uses his stone to take away pain from a specific spot. He will put it on the part that hurts and according to the way it sweats he will know what to do. I asked if chronic pain can be healed that way and his apprentice said that he has seen him cure people from really serious conditions. For example there was a French man that had done 14 operations on his leg after an accident. The leg got infected and the bacteria started eating into his bone making him unable to walk. He went to Takiwasi first but they



wanted to treat him like a drug addict after which someone took him to his teacher. The maestro told him that they had to take ayahuasca and then he would tell him if he could heal him. After they did that, he told him that he would have to stay with him for three months and do whatever he says a course of action that is very common in treating serious illness. After the second month of dieting and drinking ayahuasca, the man could already play football. He was completely healed and now has a family.

*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 shaman without much thought or ceremony. A few shamans though are starting to create mesas some temporary and some more permanent. In one retreat 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 shaman, who held ceremonies at his house and did not have the space for a permanent mesa, put together one just before the ceremony in front of the seat on which he was to be seated. In both cases everything was placed on a decorated cloth, which represented the ceremonial space.

In one 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 that they represent the

crystal palace in which the shamans work. There were a number of other crystals, semi-precious stones and a big piece of amber, which represent different elements and each one has a different power. There were also two bells that are used to clear someone's energy, two eagle feathers and a condor feather, which again represented the qualities of these birds. There were some figurines that represented pachamama (mother earth) and other spirits. All figurines were considered powerful. There were some shells that represent the ocean and a big shell that they blow at the beginning of the ceremony to call the spirits, which came from the Andes. There was a mortar and pestle with some saw dust and herbs that represented the medicine that they practice. There was a row of crystal balls that are used for divination and represent the planets. An interesting artifact was made of stone with a hole in the middle and represented protection. This stone would be used by indigenous people at the end of a stick as a weapon. Finally, there were a couple of meteorites that represented space. All these different elements were meant to represent different parts of the cosmos. A mesa like this is a great example of the syncretism of shamanic traditions.

A very important element of an ayahuasca ceremony are the *icaros*, which are the power and healing songs that are sung throughout the ceremony and they have been studied extensively (Bustos 2007, Brabec 2002, Dobkin de Rios 1973, Demange 2002, Luna 1986). The icaro carries the healing intention of shamans and there are icaros for a variety of other purposes. Icaros are also the way that the curandero communicates with the spirits of the plants mentioned in each icaro. This way, the song contains the powers of the healing or curative plants. At the beginning

of the ceremony the shaman sings icaros in the individual servings of the brew using the name of the participants for their protection and to solicit a certain outcome. Then he or she invokes the *mareación*<sup>36</sup> as well as the plant and animal spirits and puts their curative powers inside the patients' bodies. I was told that during the ceremony, sometimes the 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 shamans advised participants to concentrate on the icaros during the ceremony especially if they are having a hard time or are afraid. One shaman said that the icaros are 100 percent healing (100 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 a curandero 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 other where it was calm and that affected how people reacted as well. 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.

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<sup>36</sup> From the verb *marearse*, which means to feel sick and dizzy. It refers to the altered state induced by ayahuasca.

The icaros are said to be given to shamans directly from the spirits during their apprenticeship, in ceremony, or when dieting and in the course of their lives they might accumulate more icaros. The way that icaros are learned is 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 had to say about the transmission of icaros from the spirits to the shaman:

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]

The fear that others will copy their icaros is very common among curanderos and some will not allow recording of the ceremonies for this reason. This only happened to me once during my research however. 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 by other shamans. I was told by a shaman that I should use as many obscure words as possible, if I want to be a shaman, because it will make my icaros more powerful and more difficult for someone to learn. One shaman used words from Spanish, Quechua, Shipibo, Campa and Urarina in her icaros. On the other hand I was told by one curandero that was the most respected in the area that it is not

enough to learn an icaro and sing it. Each icaro has a particular power or energy and that can only be transmitted by the master shaman to the apprentice by will or by the spirits themselves when they give the icaro to the shaman. Therefore, even though someone can just copy someone's icaros and sing them in ceremony, these icaros have no power and therefore are not able to heal, protect etc.

One of the Western shamans with whom I worked, once told me that he had his teacher's icaros from older ceremonies on tape and he uses them when he drinks by himself. He said that now his teacher does not sing all of them anymore because he is very old. He usually sings the same icaro for everyone with small variations. He said that shamans feel every person's energy and can take the same icaro to a different direction. Icaros are the vehicle through which the shaman will infuse an object or the brew with a power, whether healing, cleansing or harmful energy and transmit this energy to the patient.

Regarding the language of the icaros, he said that it is a mixture of Cocama, Spanish, Quechua etc. At the end of familiar words each shaman will add a short suffix that usually does not mean anything and sometimes was mentioned as "spirit language". I was told that the meaning of a word is not as important as the feeling of it. The way the shaman feels at the moment is what determines the words. When I asked about the word *soplareng* for example, which is repeated in many icaros, I was told that *sopla* is the Spanish word for blow and *reng* is the suffix that the shaman put at the end of the word, something that is very common. Another common suffix is *ini*.

“The Icaros come from inside the body of the shaman”, one shaman told me showing his belly. He added that he uses some of the Icaros of his teacher but mostly 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 shaman’s creativity. I was also told that there are icaros that one shaman can sing better than others because they are the ones who created them and they can sing them better than anyone else because they have or own their energy.

An example of an icaro shows the kind of language used in it:

cielo, cielo ayahuascacitoini  
 cielo, cielo ayahuascacitoini  
 alto manta troncocitoini  
 puntaymanta cogocito  
 florcitangi oloroso cuerpocito ini  
 cielo, cielo ayahuascacitoini  
 cielo, cielo ayahuascacitoini  
 alto manta troncocito  
 puntaymanta cogocito  
 florcitangi oloroso cuerpocito ini  
 brilla, brilla, pura pura medicina cuerpocito ini  
 ninininini  
 cielo, cielo ayahuascacitoini  
 cielo, cielo ayahuascacitoini  
 brilla, brilla, pura pura medicina  
 nanananaynanayy

The above roughly translates as:

Calling to the cielo<sup>37</sup> ayahuasca

<sup>37</sup> I do not translate the word cielo because here it means a 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

Calling to the cielo ayahuasca  
 Calling to the mother trunk  
 To the budding leaf growth  
 To the fragrant flowers to the body  
 Calling to the cielo ayahuasca  
 Calling to the cielo ayahuasca  
 Calling to the mother trunk  
 To the budding leaf growth  
 Shine, shine, pure, pure medicine  
 Calling to the cielo ayahuasca  
 Calling to the cielo ayahuasca  
 Shine, shine, pure pure medicine

Normally an icaro can last for up to an hour or even longer. However, not all curanderos sing this type of icaro. I worked with one curandero whose icaros were short like popular songs and had a more standardized structure just like a song. Like many curanderos in the area she had recorded her icaros and sold them to the tourists. One would assume that the icaros were shortened for the purposes of the recording but she sang them in the same form and short duration during ceremonies and in fact her ceremonies were much shorter than any other curandero in the area. My recordings of her ceremonies are between 1.5 and 2 hours. Here is an example of her icaros:

Oh poderoso Apu  
 Medicuini medicaini mariri  
 Oh poderoso señor  
 Papa Viejo, bruju runa mariri, mariri  
 Soplarenge, soplarenge coronita  
 Tucu i tucu mariri, mariri  
 Limpiarenge cuerpituini, huacicito, mariri  
 Yura yura yuraicito, cigarunchi, cuna callari, mariri  
 Aynanina.....

---

types of ayahuasca used are trueno (thunder) ayahuasca, and ayahuasca negra (black ayahuasca). They are said to get their names from their distinctive effects.

Oh poderoso Apu  
Medicuiini medicaini mariri  
Oh poderoso senor  
Papa Viejo brujuruna mariri, mariri  
Limpiarengue, limpiarengue cuerpituini, huacicito, mariri  
soplarengue coronita  
Tucu i tucu mancuinata mariri, mariri, mariri  
Llura llura lluraicito, cigarunchi, cunacayari, mariri  
Llura llura lluraicito, cigarunchi, cunacayari, mariri  
Limpiarengue, limpiarengue cuerpituini, huacicito, mariri, mariri  
soplarengue coronita  
Tucu i tucu mancuinata mariri, mariri, mariri  
Mariri, mariri.....

In this icaro she invokes all kinds of forces, including the mountain spirits of the Andean cultures, which she translated as “father of nature” (apu). She invokes the spirit doctors and the magical phlegm (mariri, also known as yachay), discussed in the following chapter, 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. The exact words of this icaro appear in the icaros of other curanderos in the area, with a different melody.

It is often discussed around Iquitos that a particular curandero 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. Often I was asked by a curandero how many icaros another curandero with whom I was working had. However in the time that I was there I only heard a limited number of icaros sang by each shaman and in fact there were quite a few similarities between shamans. This might be because the vast majority of icaros are



for special cases and they rarely get to be used or simply because the claims of knowing a hundred icaros are an exaggeration in the first place.

There are icaros that are meant to do a variety of things such as heal, protect and defend against enemies, call the mareación, call the spirits, take the mareación away, remove negative energy, and even win the love of a woman—this last category are called huarmi icaros. Once when in ceremony with a local curandero before he performed an individual healing on me he said that he would sing a love icaro for me and my husband. It was a gentle icaro compared to other icaros he sang in his ceremonies and the main words in Spanish were “yo soy el jardinero de tus lindas flores y de tus amores” (I am the gardener of your beautiful flowers).

Another element of healing in this shamanic tradition are the *soplos* or *sopladas*, which involve blowing healing energy on a patient. This is an integral part of ceremony but is also used as a healing tool outside of ceremony on its own. For example, a curandero might determine that he or she has to perform sopladas every day on a patient for a period of time until they feel better. What is blown on the patient is mapacho smoke. During the ceremony the curandero 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. This does not happen in ceremonies with a high number of participants even though a few curanderos feel strongly about this and will perform the individual healings regardless. The curandero during his training and diets acquires spiritual force or medicine as it was called by others, which

normally resides in his or her body. During ceremonies he or she can then blow (soplar) this medicine into the patient and change their condition or heal them.

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. Even though it is a very important part of indigenous Amazonian shamanism, it was used by two of the shamans with whom I worked and I have only observed it three other times in ceremonies around Iquitos. The one time was when the curandero was trying to remove sorcery from a local woman, the second time when the curandero was healing a local woman of what was suspected sorcery and the third time when the curandero treated me and a local friend. On that occasion he sucked from my belly button for a few minutes but without making the dramatic sounds that are often described in ethnographies and I witnessed during the ceremony to counter sorcery. What is sucked out of the body is the physical manifestation of disease or the ill will of a sorcerer. It can take the form of a variety of objects such as twigs, worms, feathers, stones etc..

*Purification* and *cleansing* are also very instrumental for ayahuasca healing. 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 mentions that Siberian shamans fast, meditate and go into seclusion before ceremonies (1992:213).

Amazonian shamans also fast during the 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 8 days afterwards. The idea behind this is that the plants remain in one's system for days after the ceremony, so will continue to work and heal or teach the person, provided that they stay pure. Even though 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 retreat would not allow them because they contain sugar. On the day of the ceremony one is not supposed to eat anything after noon. It is better to eat a light meal or just fruit and drink herbal teas on that day. On the day following the ceremony, one is not supposed to eat before noon and even not to use soap or toothpaste. Some shamans have a particular way to "break" the diet on the following day and it usually involves salt and lemon taken directly under the tongue.

One of the prohibitions that is not very popular is the sexual abstinence rule. Shamans would have different theories as to why sex is prohibited—as well as different observation approaches. One shaman said that from what 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 it could also be because of taboos that were imposed by the Catholic Church.

As mentioned, participants are encouraged to keep the diet for some time after the ceremony as the medicine continues to be in the body and in order for it to continue working, the body needs to remain pure. But if the diet is broken, the healing or spiritual work stops and sometimes even worse things can happen. Peruvian consultants have told me that they got skin rashes from breaking the diet. Shamans and patients are known to be punished by the spirits for not following the dietary restrictions. In one ceremony for example a young man that had eaten a full meal in the afternoon of the day of the ritual insisted on drinking with the rest of the group despite the warning of the shaman not to. After much persistence he was allowed to drink and during the ceremony he had a really hard time—vomiting and generally feeling sick—as well as having unpleasant and scary visions. The shaman 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 being 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. Oje is quite toxic and a large quantity of water needs to be drunk to avoid poisoning. It induces very powerful

purging. On another occasion the shaman 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 shaman was a naughty witch and had created a “vomit camp”. The shaman told me that she did this so people would have less to purge during ceremony and would suffer less.

Purging during the ceremony is also extremely important and anyone who has read a testimony or report of an ayahuasca experience will have noticed that. 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 are there was to collect it. Vomiting is not the only way to purge; one of the shamans I worked with said that yawning is also cleansing and that crying is the best form of cleansing because it is also cleansing at the emotional level. Sweating is also cleansing as are other bodily sensations. For example during a series of ceremonies I felt like I had fever but when I told the shaman about this, he said that this is a wonderful way of cleansing and he sometimes felt like that as well. One of the participants 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".

A very important element of an ayahuasca ceremony are the spirits, also called doctors, or *doctorcitos*. The curanderos have a special relationship with certain spirits with which they work closely; even participants encounter spirit doctors who manipulate their body with the purpose of healing them. The curandero might also employ spirits for future protection. Shamans ascend to other worlds to consult spirits and even god in order to heal a patient. One of the shamans I worked with used to say that she comes closer to god with ayahuasca. The spirits tell shamans what to do, for example if they need to direct energy to a person with the schacapa. They also tell shamans when enough energy has been directed to a person and manage the chaos of energy that might ensue during the ceremony. Each plant, human or object has multiple spirits, which are arranged hierarchically. When invoking a spirit, the shamans call the head spirit of each plant or *madre de la planta*. The madres look at 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. Sometimes when one asks for their help the immediate response is unpleasant because they bring in more energy than the body can handle but when they pull negative things out the person feels better. In a way, "it gets worse before it gets

better”.

Some interviewees have described quite dramatic interactions with the spirits. 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 healing their body. This idea that the visions are really a distraction and not the actual purpose of the ayahuasca experience was shared by many people. Navigating the visionary experience can be tricky for other reasons as well. One of the shamans said that many times in his ceremonies spirits offer things to the participants. Before one ceremony he said that if they give us flowers or stones or fruit we can take it, but warned us not to take anything red or black because these are things associated with sorcery.

Brabec de Mori compares Western psycholytic therapy to indigenous Shipibo healing practice and finds contrary perceptions of similar phenomena. He argues that “while the therapist/patient ‘enters’ deeper and deeper into his own consciousness finally transcending it experiencing Grof’s “transpersonal phenomena”, the non-Western healer ascends in ‘superrealistic’ worlds ever higher...” (2002:5). I would argue that in the context of shamanic tourism a hybrid of these two is experienced where the patient travels both in their own consciousness and in other realms, where they encounter entities that assist them in their healing. Essentially they become their “own shaman” as it was often described by participants but it is often with the help of these spirits and after being able to “open up” to the spirit world.

### **The element of Crisis**

Often, it was perceived that some sort of spiritual crisis had to occur before a successful healing. This way, negative experiences become the springboard for healing and positive transformation. Several curanderos told me 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 used to quick and easy fixes usually in pill form. This element of the ordeal is ever present in interviews. I was told by curanderos that the medicine works in the body whether one has a positive experience or not, or even when one does not feel any *mareación* or has no visions. However, before the body can be healed any negative things have to come out first, even though it is not necessary for the person to experience the darkness for it to get cleansed.

Working with one's energy is central in this model. Anything that puts one in an ASC, such as ayahuasca, is believed to open up one's energy. This way it is possible to remove blockages that one might not even know were there. All shamans encourage participants to sit up in ceremony as this helps the energy flow better in their body and they will not fall asleep which is considered potentially dangerous as it makes the person more vulnerable to attacks. In one retreat there were a number of suggestions in the booklet that was provided to the participants that gave instructions on how to manipulate or ground the energy in their body.

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 dimensions in ayahuasca healing—physical, psychological, spiritual—which are interconnected. The ayahuasca experience is very intense on the body, yet some participants would focus on the visionary aspects of the experience. One of them found it very interesting when I talked to her about how corporeal the experience was for me. However, many shared that the visions are not the most important aspect of the experience for them.

One particular shaman working in a retreat center that focuses a lot on transformative work explained their philosophy as follows. Both light and darkness exist in our bodies but the darkness tends to hide the light and we usually only see the darkness. This darkness comes from fears, traumas, fright, and negative thoughts. I was told that it was important for one to “straighten their energy” and that it can take a long time to do that. Our energy becomes “crossed” (cruzada) from anger, bad thoughts, that 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 since 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, it is the negative things that exist in the body, such as anger, depression, sadness, and fear, which are resisting leaving the body. This was echoed in the way people discussed someone who had a bad time in a ceremony.

They would attribute it to the fact that he or she had many negative things to purge. For example I was in a ceremony, in which participated a recently arrived young man from Europe. The rest of the group were experienced and have been having ceremonies together for a long time and his first ceremony was very difficult in the sense that he purged a lot and made very loud sounds. The following day, the consensus was that having just come from Europe he was carrying still a lot of negativity that he had to purge, especially because of the lifestyle he lead 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.

Spirits are very important when it comes to recuperating the soul fragments (recuperarngichoini in icaros). It was perceived as a very common condition and a result of modern life. Participants were encouraged to ask the spirits to bring back the fragments of their soul. Icaros can also call back lost soul pieces, but the participants were also encouraged to invite their pieces back and welcome them back. 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 off 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 shamans would handle that energy and send it away.

Participants were also told to think about why they were holding on to something, exploring whether it was serving them in some way. For example, it was

believed that people often hold on to their anger because there is a part of them that 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. It also 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 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 shaman 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”. The same shaman 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. One of the ceremonies in a retreat focused on self-love and stressed that it is the road to self-healing. Following is part of a speech that a shaman gave during a ceremony that exemplifies this approach:

“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 ourselves  
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?

We spend all day thinking, thinking, thinking, pontificating [changing his voice]

– “and what shall we talk about next?

Let us think, shall we talk about this?

Shall we talk about that?

Let's discuss it, let's discuss the world.

Shall we not? hmmm, yeah....”

And we forget to love ourselves.

–“we should talk about that too, hmmm, yes...

I like this, I like that, hmm...I quite like this,

But then there is this other little piece that I like so much. Hmmm...”

And we forget to love ourselves.

It's the easiest thing you've ever done.

It happens all at once.

It's the moment you end that conflict of not loving yourself,  
you'll love yourself.

Not for any other reason, but because you can.

Do it once and tell me how you feel.

If anything is going to change, you have to do something new.

You can't do what we've already done before.

Love will always be new.

Love flows through your heart all the time,  
and everything else flows through your head.

Love is new, love is change, love is evolution, love is creation.

Love yourself.

And end the conflict

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 several 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”.

Later he tells 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 important in this model is that the “patient” is not passive and expecting the expert to save or heal them, but take an active role and full responsibility for their healing and future well-being. This was encouraged by most shamans I worked with. Participants also said that one has to work on their healing; people predominantly used the word “work” for what they do during a ceremony.

Even though 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 though 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.

To exemplify this along with the ambivalence of Amazonian medicine, when I asked a shaman how come a known brujo can claim that he can heal very serious conditions he told me that sorcery can heal as well. He was not so much interested in healing physical ailments himself. He wanted to help people change the deeper reasons that make them sick, this way he can have a more permanent impact. He also thinks that health is subjective, for example he feels quite healthy but the doctors found a number of things that are wrong with him. The opposite can also be true for some people.

To echo the argument in chapter 7 about a personal crisis leading to transformation of the self, I found that the same applied to healing. Often, it was perceived that some sort of spiritual crisis had to occur before a successful healing. This way negative experiences become the springboard for healing and positive transformation.

## **Risks**

Even though there is evidence which shows that people with psychological problems can be helped by ayahuasca, and that its use is not harmful when used in a controlled environment (Barbosa et al. 2005, Callaway et al. 1999, Mckenna et al. 1996, Riba and Barbanoj 2005) there needs to be more research on this particular issue in the context of shamanic tourism, ideally research in a more controlled environment, such as in a particular retreat center. Some researchers have looked at



the risks resulting from ayahuasca analogue use by inexperienced users (Brush et al. 2003; Sklerov et al. 2005) based on information found on the internet (Bogenschutz 2000). However, it also needs to be clarified that there are certain risks associated with the participation in shamanic tourism, at least the way it is practiced by most practitioners today.

Most of the curanderos I worked with did not do any screening for preexisting health conditions that might be contraindicated to ayahuasca use. Several medications might interact negatively with some of the components of ayahuasca as well, one of them being depression medication. Some scientists (Callaway 1995, Callaway and Grob 1998, Savinelli and Halpern 1995) caution that the combination of SSRIs and the MAO-inhibiting harmala alkaloids present in ayahuasca could trigger a reaction called serotonin syndrome that can be potentially dangerous. This has been connected especially to non-traditional preparations. That being said, there might be some informal questioning before the ceremony, about what medication participants are on, but some would argue that this is not enough. This is probably due to the assumption that the participants have already done their research and know the risks but it could also be because of the curanderos' limited knowledge or reluctance to turn clients away. One of the shamans listed on the back of her business card a variety of recommendations<sup>38</sup> for participating in ayahuasca ceremonies and she occasionally warned participants that they should not participate if they had high blood pressure or heart problems, but there was no consistent or thorough screening

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<sup>38</sup> The list of contraindications was: menstruation, pregnancy, other drugs, alcohol on the day of the ceremony, high blood pressure.

per se. The only thing that might qualify as screening would be an informal conversation the first time someone met the shaman.

I found only one place that does extensive screening before people sign up for their program and they also make people sign a release form which explained that according to Peruvian law it is illegal to provide health care if one is not a licensed health care professional. Therefore they were only able to offer spiritual advice and guidance but no diagnosis or treatment of any kind. Despite this, ceremonies and discussions did focus on healing but under the explanatory model discussed in the previous section, which is not a biomedical model. In the same location they have extensive sessions where members of the staff explain all aspects of the ayahuasca experience to participants along with sharing their own personal stories, attempting to prepare people as best as possible, even though they jokingly shared that there is no way one can prepare themselves for it. Before the first ceremony they have individual meetings with the master shaman and his apprentice who translates as well and they discuss what the participant's goals are and whether they are trying to address a particular concern. It would definitely be beneficial to see similar practices adopted by more retreats and lodges focusing on ayahuasca tourism.

Another important precaution that needs to be taken is the dietary restrictions before taking ayahuasca. Just like with certain medications, certain foods contain substances that might interact with some of the alkaloids in ayahuasca; these include foods that are aged, preserved, dried, fermented, pickled, cured, rancid, old, overripe, or spoiled. These are foods that are high in tryptamines that may interact with the

MAOIs in the brew. People would be warned and made aware of the dietary restrictions but the importance of following the diet was not always stressed and many westerners would not take them seriously and did what was more convenient to them. Again there was no strict monitoring of this, especially in cases where people would participate in individual ceremonies with a shaman. Participating in a retreat where everyone eats the same food according to the dietary restrictions helps avoid that problem. Unfortunately westerners are not used to the bland diet that is recommended and get easily tired of it. Some consciously take the risk or try to rationalize their choice but the fact remains that the diet is part of the ayahuasca experience as much as the ceremony is.

Other risks involved with ayahuasca come from the fact that there are many counterfeit or inexperienced shamans that have entered the profession for profit and do not look out for the benefit of the participants. I have heard many stories from my consultants of negative experiences they have had with some very irresponsible shamans. For example, I was told of a story of a woman who had a negative experience with ayahuasca, when the shaman gave her ayahuasca and left her alone in the jungle. Another story was about a ritual where the shaman gave people ayahuasca and left them alone for 4 hours without any guidance or singing. Most people find this behavior reckless and agree that the ritual is very important; people need to follow the icaros or there is a risk of them “getting lost” as they described it.

This type of behavior creates an even bigger risk if we are dealing with people who might have serious emotional issues that they are trying to address with

ayahuasca. I have seen some of them putting themselves at great emotional and psychological risk in the hands of unscrupulous shamans. For example there was the case of a young woman who was trying to heal some deep emotional trauma caused by sexual abuse in her childhood. The shaman treating her, sensing her vulnerability promised too many things to her and tried to convince her to stay in her healing center and present herself as an addict. Clearly the young woman's problem was not addiction but the shaman was trying to get funding from the university to start treating drug addicts following the model of the Takiwasi clinic in Tarapoto and needed "addicts" to treat. However, she had no credentials that she could treat people with serious emotional problems and she had nobody on staff who did. Nevertheless, she did everything she could to convince the young woman to stay, even when she expressed the urge to leave; as time progressed she tried to manipulate her and control certain aspects of her life. For example she would tell her how to confront her family and what to tell them, without considering whether she was ready for that confrontation. The young woman eventually left but I have not been successful in getting in touch with her to follow up on her case.

Another case that stands out was the one of another young woman who got sick while at the healing center. When I talked to her she had been sick for a couple of days with diarrhea and fever. I translated for her and the shaman listened to her lungs and said she was fine. She also said that she probably had the flu and that she got it from another guest. For the whole time she behaved like a medical doctor and insisted that she should not go to the city and see a doctor or take any medicine apart

from what she was giving her. She gave her some *piri piri* and before she gave it to her she sang a bit over the cup. They had given her some earlier but she threw it up and she had not been able to eat anything all day. Later in the evening the woman told me that someone from the staff went to the hospital in the city and brought her some pills but they kept the whole affair secret because the shaman was so adamant about not getting any pills. When the people at the hospital heard her symptoms they said that it was some kind of stomach infection and needed to be treated. At the time we had heard of several other people in Iquitos who apparently had a similar infection.

Another aspect that adds to the risk factor is the existence of alcoholism among many shamans. This is a common phenomenon in Iquitos and many shamans are known for their bad temper and excessive drinking. This is usually known among locals but it is easy to conceal from tourists that are only in town for a few days. For example, locals would say about a shaman that she was considered to have been very powerful until she started drinking. The same shaman told the tourists that she never drank alcohol and never ate Chinese food because it was unhealthy. I have been in one ceremony with this shaman on a day that I suspect she had been drinking alcohol before ceremony. She had been in town while a large group of people was waiting for her at her healing center to have a ceremony. When she arrived and kissed us to greet us she smelled of alcohol. She gave a long speech about ayahuasca and later in the evening we had an ayahuasca ceremony during which she sang very little and was asleep for parts of it. Many people had a hard time in that ceremony and said

that they needed the icaros to guide them; at times someone asked her to sing but there was no answer. On the next day, some of the participants tried to look on the positive side of this and said that it was the first time that they had to rely on themselves because the shaman did not do what they are supposed to. It is fortunate that all the participants in the particular ceremony were experienced and there were no major incidents, but had there been someone who really needed guidance I doubt that they would have found it that night.

One can often hear stories about shamans that were threatened by the spirits to stop drinking ayahuasca because they did not follow the diet, but still these shamans continue in the trade. And of course there is the possibility of adverse reactions between ayahuasca and alcohol, since alcohol can interact with the MAOIs in the brew. My suspicion, at least with one shaman, is that they pretend to drink ayahuasca during the ceremony or they drink a very small amount. This suspicion was also shared by a local friend who actually had more experience with the shaman and I trust her judgment.

The fact is that shamans are just human beings with weaknesses like anyone else. However, certain westerners, at least at the beginning, treat them as spiritual teachers and have the expectations they would have from a guru or spiritual guide. Often people project the experiences they have in ceremonies to the shaman. If they have good experiences, then they consider the shaman to be very powerful and a great healer. I found that very few shamans will actually point out that it is not them that does the healing but the plants, the spirits and the patients themselves. Most will

enjoy the respect they receive and probably exaggerate their abilities.

A shaman, with whom I worked briefly, was fairly controversial among my consultants. The shaman I was working with at the time told me that he was trying to heal a friend of mine, from all the negative things he got from the other shaman. In one of his ceremonies he saw that the evil shaman was there without anybody “calling” him, apparently to watch what was going on. When I asked him for details he revealed some interesting facts. A number of people had stopped drinking with the other shaman because of some questionable behavior on his part. He attempted to manipulate them in various ways and he often tried to manipulate beautiful women. He usually told them to come back during the day and talk to him in private. For example as soon as he found out that one of the women in the group was not in a relationship with her male friend, he tried to convince her to have sex with him and he almost succeeded. They also claimed that the shaman took away their visions. My friend said that when he drank with this shaman he was scared and everything was dark. I told him that since the third time I drank with him I started seeing everything dark as well (I had no visions) and he was convinced that it was the evil shaman’s doing. My friend’s girlfriend also felt really bad every time she drank with him. When I talked to my sick friend about this he said that the second time he drank with this shaman the spirits told him that he was bad; he was surprised and did not trust his instinct because his first experience with him had been very positive. After a few ceremonies he decided to stay away from him for a while. Even if one dismisses the idea that the shaman could have spiritually harmed the participants, the sexual

harassment claims alone are serious.

The last issue I want to address in this section is that of sexual assaults by certain shamans. As in the previous examples, some male shamans will take advantage of the vulnerability of certain women and the trust they might place in them and approach them sexually either during or after ceremony. In general, most people I have talked with frown upon this behavior but it happens more often than one thinks. Accusations of rape by counterfeit or even legitimate shamans abound in Iquitos, a recent one having just come out as I write these lines<sup>39</sup>. I was told once about a ceremony that took place in the United States and was led by a westerner. My consultant told me that this shaman was flirting with two women during the ceremony and then rejected them to feed his ego. Another participant in the ceremony was in love with one of the women and the shaman kept him away from her for the same reason.

Unfortunately, physical sexual abuse is not the only form sexual abuse can take. I was told that many shamans will attack women sexually during ceremony but at the psychic level. I remember a ceremony during which I felt great discomfort in the abdominal area. At the time I did not know that psychic sexual attacks were possible. A few months later I talked to the apprentice of the particular shaman who had a falling out with him and one of the reasons for this was that he would attack women in ceremonies. He explained the concept of the psychic sexual attacks to me, that shamans can attack a woman in the energetic or spiritual level without touching

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<sup>39</sup> I am referring to the German tourist who was a victim of what appears to be a counterfeit shaman: <http://diariolaregion.com/web/2010/03/11/turista-alemana-clama-ayuda-y-justicia/>



them physically, and when I described to him the bodily sensations I had during the ceremony with his teacher he concluded that this was probably what had happened to me. He believed that he had tried to attack me but I was strong and resisted and that is where the discomfort came from. On another occasion, I talked to a couple of young women who had been in ceremony with a shaman, who nobody had known before and who had come from the jungle to lead some ceremonies in Iquitos; what they described of that night was compelling. They said that throughout the duration of the ceremony, they felt they were being attacked by the shaman and his assistant and one of them even felt invisible hands touching private parts of her body. Both women were horrified by the experience.

## Chapter 6: Sorcery

The other pillar of Amazonian shamanism is sorcery. Rivalry, jealousy, and mutual accusations of sorcery are integral in Amazonian shamanism. Such accusations have been noted in other areas as well and are not unique to Amazonia or Iquitos (Lepowsky 1993). However, as I have shown, the image of shamanism that most westerners, who pursue the ayahuasca experience, have is that of healing.

One of the biggest misconceptions about shamanism in the West is that shamanism revolves around spirituality and love. A Western shaman in his attempt to differentiate himself from New Age, says that scholars have erroneously argued that shamanism is about a magic journey “but neglected the dimensions of love and spirituality that are in its core” (Kottler and Carlson 2004:44). This viewpoint seems to ignore the political dimensions of shamanism as well as its role in conflict (witchcraft etc.). One reason that this belief is so pervasive might be the disbelief of westerners for the effectiveness of witchcraft and their automatic dismissal of it. On the other hand it could very well be a conscious effort on the part of the practitioners; if the people who have made a career out of shamanism in the West dwell on the negative side of shamanism then it would not be so attractive to their audience. They have an idea of what their audience craves and they reckon it is not battles with evil spirits and shamans.

Most popular and New Age literature presents an overly positive picture of shamanism throughout the world. In this era of Western fascination with shamanism its dark side has been covert. A result of this romanticization of shamanism is that

even when there is evidence of malevolent shamans there is a tendency to dismiss them as ‘pseudo shamans’. This is not only a Western phenomenon. As Mandelstam Balzer notes in Siberia “there is a tendency to romanticize ‘true traditional’ Sakha shamans as fully benevolent, priestly, and white” (Mandelstam Balzer 1996:313). However, she reports that according to her consultants a shaman is not truly great unless he evokes both feelings of love and fear (1996:313). The romanticization of shamanism and similar traditions is not necessarily only an effect of Western interest in them. The focus on shamanic rivalries and competition makes indigenous peoples themselves uneasy and it appears that they might choose to forget the negative aspects of their spiritual tradition, especially if we take into account that these traditions were demonized and suppressed for a long time (Mandelstam Balzer 1996:314).

Many westerners doubt whether or not sorcery actually exists, but they find ways to integrate this concept to their worldview. One of the Western shamans who healed people from sorcery told me that he did not actually believe in it. However, he believed that it existed since so many people believed in it—in a way it was brought into existence by their belief. For him, it was people’s negative feelings toward each other that can cause harm. This means that even if someone does not pay a shaman to harm another person or employ some kind of spell, just his negative feelings (jealousy, anger, hate etc.) can cause harm to the other person. This is similar to the evil eye concept in some European cultures, according to which, one can cause harm just by looking at someone in an envious way. This is because either this person is

generally negatively disposed to others or because they happen to have negative feelings toward a particular person. Another shaman told me that when shamans fight each other spiritually they do not necessarily do it consciously. Their spirit acts on its own because it is compelled to; this way it is possible that shamans might be quite civil to each other in everyday life, while having major shamanic battles without even being aware of it. This idea is closer to the concept of witchcraft as outlined by Douglas and Evans-Pritchard.

The existence of healing shamans and witch shamans, who use their power to inflict harm, is not unique to Amazonia. Eliade (1989[1964]:205) mentions the existence of “white” shamans and of “black” shamans among certain Siberian peoples. The former have relations with the gods and the latter with evil spirits. He also argues that one of the most important roles of the shaman is to combat “black” magicians and prevent them from hurting the community. He also speaks of this in terms of the shaman protecting the world of “light” against the world of “darkness”. One of my consultants mentioned this battle between light and darkness when speaking of shamans attacking him as well. In North American shamanism shamanic powers are generally understood as having a healing purpose; however, they can be used for sorcery, witchcraft or even revenge by the shaman or on behalf of someone else (Gill 1993:217).

Recent scholarly work on the subject of shamanism in Amazonia stresses that “Amazonian shamanism is not a loving shamanism” (Fausto 2004). The concept of energy is a key metaphor in Amazonian worldview and is related to the soul, power,

desire and intention. Power resides in the human body and is affected by the ingestion or expulsion of substances. Just as in North American shamanism object intrusion is considered a common cause of illness. It is considered to be the consequence of malevolent intent and ascribed to sorcery and witchcraft. The healing shaman sucks the foreign object from the patient's body and spits it out. In this worldview, good and evil are not fixed categories but are relational and highly contextual.

From several ceremonies I witnessed, in which locals participated, I noticed that Peruvians were more outspoken about their visions and experiences, and focused more on their social environment. For example, in one ceremony, a young man was clearly distressed, repeatedly mentioning that other people wanted to harm him. In other ceremonies, I noticed that locals tended to be more vocal and relied a great deal on the shaman to help them during the ceremony. Westerners, who tended to be more reflexive, were disturbed by the noise and wished to be left alone. For them, the ceremonies were like an exercise in self-reliance that reinforced their individualism. I mention this difference because I think it might help to highlight the difference between the ways the two cultures interpret and perceive visionary experiences.

Fausto (1999) has focused on the centrality of predation in social and political dynamics in Amazonia. Peruvians who have grown up in what is perceived as a predatory social environment tend to attribute their visions or distress and misfortune to sources outside of themselves; sudden illness or misfortune is seen as

unnatural and most likely caused by a sorcerer. On the other hand, the more individualistic westerners tend to look inward and see visions as internal processes.

In accordance with New Age vocabulary, the phenomenon of sorcery and shamanic warfare is perceived by some westerners as a universal battle between good and evil, and fail to see it as contextualized in local conflicts. Brown (1985, 1989) argues that the analytical notion of a strict distinction between benevolent and malevolent shamans is an oversimplification. Shamans have the potential for both good and harm as their power comes from the same sources. Shamans are ambivalent and they have to negotiate continuously in order to continue to be considered benevolent actors in the local social relations. This is also attested by Murphy (1960:135), who argues that among the Mundurucú shamans, in addition to having the capacity of curing disease, they also have the capacity of inflicting harm on others and sorcerers are shamans “gone bad”. As a result, their position in society is ambivalent and they are considered to be the bearers of a latent and generalized aggression; they are often blamed for tragedies in the community and many sorcerers have been executed for this reason.

This has obviously political ramifications. From the perspective of the sorcerer, sorcery is an attempt to gain power within the societal chaos. As Balandier put it, “sorcery is born out of excess, of non-conformity, of conflict, of the refusal to accept the restrictions imposed by the place one occupies in society” (Balandier 1990:106). In Amazonia, among the locals, often it is the financially successful shamans that are considered to be sorcerers. According to some of my consultants, these shamans

have managed to be successful with outsiders because they have been aided by malevolent but powerful spirits. These spirits are considered to take control of the shaman in question and use him or her for pursuing their own purposes. The shamans themselves are not necessarily powerful themselves; it is enough that the spirits working through them are. Apparently power is not only ambivalent but slippery as well.

What people defined as *brujeria* were negative intentions directed to a person in order to harm them. The brujo or hechicero does not have to physically attack someone; he or she sends their spirit helpers, for example spiders or snakes, to harm or poison a person. Plants or trees are also used in *brujeria*; the puca lupuna or red lupuna tree is very commonly used. For example if one wants to harm someone they can gather the leftovers of the food of the person they want to harm, then carve a hole in the tree bark and put the food there. Over time the person will feel sick, experience pain in the abdominal area, which will swell and the person will eventually die. In cases like this when the brujo introduces negative energy into somebody's body nothing can be diagnosed by medical doctors.

Warfare between shamans is very common and can take many forms. While combating sorcery in order to heal patients during the ceremony, the shaman is vulnerable to attacks by other shamans. Shamans find different ways to attack their rivals. For example, if a client has drunk ayahuasca with a malevolent shaman and that person drinks with someone else afterwards, the malevolent shaman tries to interfere in the ceremony of the rival shaman through the person that was previously

their patient. They might manifest through the body of the patient making noises that are distracting for the rest of the participants or direct negative energy to the rival shaman. They can also place dangers and threats for the rival shaman in the astral realm so that he or she will have to fight them off as soon as he or she enters it under ayahuasca inebriation. This means that for a shamanic fight to take place, both shamans do not need to be in ceremony at the same time because time in the astral realm is not linear; merely placing something there guarantees that it will be there whenever the rival shaman enters the spiritual dimension. I was told that these attacks are not as powerful as when both shamans are having ceremony at the same time, and they are easy to defeat.

The shamans do not have to know each other personally to attack. I was told that they can locate the mesas of other shamans in space and attack there. One of my consultants, a shaman, said that he can see the mesas of other shamans as if on a map and he can even tell which ones are having ceremony. The same person said that various shamans from other countries have attacked him and his teacher but these attacks have diminished over time. If another shaman appears in their ceremony they ask them what they want, then ask them to leave and if they refuse they threaten them. If they stay, they start taking their “stuff”, meaning their powers. They can do whatever they want with that power; they can either use it or destroy it.

In warfare, shamans need to have weapons. One of my consultants has a protective spirit suit and boots that one of his teachers gave him. In fact one of the ceremony participants said that she felt the boots with her hands while he was



standing over her. The weapon of choice that shamans use in Amazonia is the magic dart or *virote*. Much like the medicine substance, virotes are stored in the phlegm that resides in the shaman's body and he can retrieve them as necessary. Shamans project virotes to make someone sick or to attack another shaman. They can be removed from the body of the victim by sucking. For the most part, this type of attack is used against other shamans but the darts can hit participants in the ceremony by accident. One of the shamans said that he never got the physical phlegm but it was given to him in a dream. The spirits gave him a cup with a white substance and he had to drink it. Then he felt it settling across his chest. He also said that his whistling was given to him in a vision. In order to keep its power, in his icaros he sometimes sings the word *mariri*; that is because if something is not used it loses its power.

### **The sorcerers' attacks**

I was not immediately aware of the relevance of sorcery to my research. Indeed, it did not strike me as important until I was nearly halfway through my fieldwork, and a Peruvian friend, who had participated in ayahuasca ceremonies and who knew a number of local shamans, expressed his concern about my involvement in ayahuasca ceremonies. He explained to me what a local shaman had told him, in order to warn me of the intrinsic risks. He told me that spirits often demand that shamans inflict harm, or even kill, in exchange for the powers they impart.

At first, I did not take this statement seriously, but later, while interviewing a

shaman, I casually mentioned the conversation and asked her if she had ever had such an experience. She claimed she had not, and I did not pursue the matter further. I was aware of accusations of sorcery in the world of shamanism, but I always perceived such charges as a sign of competitiveness among the shamans. Additionally, one of my key consultants in the field, a westerner who had lived in the area for years, dismissed any possibility of the existence of sorcery, and I accepted his conviction. As a result, for a long time, I did not see sorcery as an inherent aspect of shamanism in the context of my research.

As my fieldwork progressed, however, the benign facade of local shamanism began to peel away, revealing a more ambivalent picture. Furthermore, while at the beginning of my research, stories of sorcery were easy to dismiss as fabrications, when my consultants and I became directly involved in sorcery cases, they were impossible to ignore.

Indeed, during the first months of my fieldwork, I did not hear much about sorcery from westerners. All of the interviews I conducted regarding shamanism revolved around healing, personal insight, and psychological growth; all contact with other worlds or beings was described as amicable, and there was no mention of evil or harmful entities or of threatening encounters. When someone did mention a negative experience, it was explained away as either a manifestation of negative or dark aspects of the participant's psyche, or of unresolved fear of the unknown, which had to be confronted. One of the goals of the participants, and especially of novice shamans, was to learn to overcome that fear during ceremony. Consequently, I

developed the impression that among westerners, responsibility for negative experiences lay with the participant, and that often such experiences were discussed in terms of one's "demons" manifesting in vision. These demons could represent unresolved psychological issues or conflicts in someone's life, appearing in purely metaphorical form. During that time, I did not know how to interpret the following, which one of my consultants described after a ceremony; he said that in his visions, he was fighting a lot of enemies and that it was a rather violent night for him. He especially fought a man he met during the previous summer and a woman that he met at the Witches' Market in La Paz, Bolivia. Finally he said that he saw darts in his body and took them out and he believed that in doing so he was getting rid of curses.

Thus, the aforementioned warning from my local friend, the only such warning that stands out in my memory from that period, made sense to me only much later. As described above, the friend warned me that shamans who work with ayahuasca are asked by the spirits with whom they work to harm others in order to help them heal. Even though the urge of the shaman to harm has been discussed by others (Perruchon 2003) in the context of indigenous shamanism, at the time I believed that this was probably an urban legend, a result of mystification of ayahuasca shamanism by the locals.

Furthermore, though occasionally someone would mention that a local curandero was a known sorcerer, or *brujo*, since these claims were never elaborated I did not make much of them. Naturally, I had read the literature and was aware of the importance of sorcery in indigenous Amazonian societies, but I did not see any place

for it in the hybrid shamanic tourism practiced in jungle towns of modern Peru. I reasoned that promoting shamanism as a healing practice would benefit towns and practitioners alike by attracting tourists; moreover, I did not think that westerners would give credence to sorcery to begin with, as it does not fit their cultural paradigm. It seemed to me that when sorcery was mentioned it was always to accuse some other shaman in order to discredit him and to discourage clients from visiting him by creating uncertainty about his moral values.

During this time, I was working closely with a local female shaman with whom I started having problems fairly soon. At first, I attributed our issues to cultural differences, including what I perceived as my own mistrust and paranoia. I deduced that being far from home, from anything familiar, and participating frequently in ayahuasca ceremonies certainly could have contributed to developing such sentiments. When I started having clearly negative (or what could be described as dark) experiences in ceremonies, the shaman showed frustration at my lack of progress and implied that my visions were products of my “bad conscience”. Despite my frustration, I continued working with this shaman for the sake of my research. When our interactions became unbearable, however, I decided to distance myself from the shaman, working with her only occasionally when the opportunity arose.

In one such opportunity, I accompanied a group of inexperienced young women in ceremony with the shaman. During the ceremony, my peaceful visions were violently interrupted by gory scenes, accompanied by a feeling of malevolence that I was sure was not my own. Visions of bloody limbs floating around me

appeared as I experienced an unexplained anger toward the shaman. Of course, at that point I was not aware of the ways sorcery is used in ceremony, and thus I did not know how to make sense of the experience. Since it did not occur to me that it could have been caused by somebody else, I decided that it was a product of my frustration over my relationship with the shaman.

Months later, my fieldwork began to take a different turn. I started working with different shamans, researching different styles. After a few ceremonies, sorcery suddenly became the central theme both in ceremonies and interviews. It seemed as if the secret had been let out, and suddenly sorcery appeared to be everywhere. I started working with an old local shaman and his European apprentice, who had been working with him for years. The apprentice had interesting insights into sorcery, and he frequently discussed shamanic warfare. He explained to me that there were dark forces as well as light forces in shamanism. He and his teacher, a very powerful shaman, were warriors of the light, and the dark shamans wanted to hurt them, motivated by *envidia*, envy, or in attempt to steal their powers. Thus, he said he had often been attacked by other shamans in his ceremonies.

What the shaman described as warfare, I interpreted as good old-fashioned competitiveness. The shamans were vying for the same limited number of clients, so, I reasoned, they accused each other of sorcery and presented themselves as the “good guys” in order to entice clients and scare them away from the competition.

Nonetheless, to the shamans, the warfare between forces of good and evil was very real, and the key to all this was power. Energy is very important in

Amazonian cultures, and as I have already established, shamanism is especially concerned with manipulation of energy and power. A skilled and powerful shaman is able to manipulate the energy in a ceremony to make it more intense or to keep it calm, using the *icaros* (shamanic songs) and their *schacapa* (rattle made of palm leaves) as their tools. In this way, he or she can, if he or she wishes, influence the experiences of the ceremony participants. The elderly shaman with whom I worked is known for keeping the energy in his ceremonies gentle and pleasant, which takes a certain amount of skill.

Shamans become more powerful as they age and accumulate spirit helpers. They can be given power directly from the spirits in ceremony, in dreams, or by inheriting their teachers' power. A teacher decides who will inherit his power following his death, and the transfer of power occurs in ceremony after he dies. The old shaman's European apprentice told me that he would inherit his teachers "stuff," *sus cosas*, meaning his power, after he died.

Sorcerers on the other hand, are known for stealing power from other shamans in shamanic battles that take place in ceremony. Sorcerers attack their enemies with objects, such as spirit darts, limbs, or crocodile tails, aided by their spirit helpers. The ultimate goal is usually to steal the other shaman's "juice", or power. The motivation might be simply envy, or the fact that they lack that power themselves since they have not gone through as rigorous a shamanic training. Power, itself, or else the power source, is neutral and can be used for purposes of good and evil (Perruchon 2003).

In one of the ceremonies that the European shaman led, which mostly involved Western participants, as well as some from Latin America, one of the participants made loud and disturbing noises for the entire duration of the ceremony. The sounds he made could only be described as “otherworldly,” and they disturbed everyone in the ceremony. I did not make much of the situation, as it is common in ceremonies for people to have negative experiences and lose control. Later that evening, however, when the shaman tried to perform the customary individual healing or blessing, he started chastising the participant and commanding him not to blow on him. This seemed like a rude action and did not make any sense until the next day when the shaman explained to me what had happened. According to him, the noises that the participant made originated from a rival shaman with whom he had been in ceremony recently, and who wanted to disrupt our ceremony.

As the European shaman explained, one way a shaman can interfere with a ceremony is through a participant who has been in his ceremony before and who acts as a form of psychic or energetic link. Because the participant had been in ceremony with him previously, the rival shaman had the power to “find” him while he was in our ceremony, and was able to act through him in order to disrupt the ceremony and attack the European shaman. The European shaman said that the other shaman was blowing through the participant on him and had attempted to harm him; his chastising was addressed to the rival shaman, not to the participant. For that reason, he explained, it is important to establish a safe circle before the ceremony, and for everyone to stay in that circle for the duration of the ceremony.

This is what I recorded in my field notes after two different ceremonies with the same shaman:

“He said that they were attacking him and that he had a hard time. It was the grandfather of one of the Peruvian girls that was supposed to drink with him but did not come. He is the shaman that prepares the ayahuasca for him. He was mad because his granddaughter will not drink ayahuasca with her grandfather and she prefers to drink with him”.

“After the ceremony he said that they attacked him again and that it was really hard on him. Ayahuasca told him not to drink again until he is completely healthy otherwise he will not be able to bear the attacks. This time it was not clear who was attacking him but they were several. Some of them would attack him with really hot air. He told us that he has many protections, a giant, some warriors, and other spirits. He also told us a story about ahumama, a plant that is also a hallucinogen. He said that it is a dangerous plant and he would like to diet it some time. Its spirit is a man in black clothes with a cape and a black hat and he has no face. He said that his teacher put it there to protect him but at the beginning he did not know. He saw this dark man around the circle of the ritual and he was blowing him to go away. Afterwards he said that to his teacher and he told him that it was the spirit of ahumama and that he put it there to protect him. ... He said that in the last 7 ceremonies they have been attacking him. That for him means that he is doing something right and they want to make him quit. He said that sometimes they bring him to his limits and he can barely hang on”.

I was surprised to hear this account from a European shaman, from whom I expected a more rational approach. This definitely challenged the theory that shamanic experiences are shaped by culture. This man also spoke of seeing specific jungle or plant spirits, which, he claimed, appear in the same form to anyone who practices shamanism in the area. Such forms, he claimed, were definitely not figments of his imagination; undoubtedly, he had learned to identify them through his long apprenticeship. Nonetheless, the most compelling aspect of all that he recounted was his story of shamanic warfare and his participation in shamanic battles



in ceremonies I had witnessed. Importantly, this was not some ethnographic account of a distant indigenous group; it was too close to home to dismiss lightly.

Soon after this encounter, I met an American apprentice working with a different shaman. He knew the female shaman with whom I had worked and had a few stories to tell about her. He said that she was definitely a sorcerer, though not very powerful, and that she had attacked him in ceremony. He maintained that before she gave him the ayahuasca to drink, she did not sing a blessing into the brew, but rather another type of icaro meant to harm him. He believed she attacked him because he withheld information from her about money (an issue that seemed to be a source of conflict between her and other people, including me). In his vision during the ceremony, she tormented him and tried to access the information he withheld from her. When I described my experience with the same shaman he did not seem at all surprised, and he was convinced that she had attacked me, as well.

This American apprentice seemed to have extensive knowledge of sorcery and shamanic battles, and he talked about them in a very matter-of-fact way. He also described how he had been attacked by other shamans early in his apprenticeship and had been paralyzed on one side of his body for months until his teachers managed to counter the sorcery and heal him. He said that shamans attack each other all the time. His maestro comes from a lineage of shamans who have fought witch doctors for generations. The biggest sin for them is to kill; they can fight the brujos and take their energy but they cannot kill them. Brujos often attack them because they are the most powerful shamans. When his teacher's teacher died, a number of shamans

appeared in the ceremony in which his power was to be transmitted and they unsuccessfully tried to take it away.

At that point, something very powerful was suddenly staring at me in the face, and I could no longer pretend it did not exist. Sorcery was being discussed and practiced all around me, and I was in the middle of it. For example, I participated in a few ceremonies with the American shaman in order to clear a Peruvian family's house from sorcery. Apparently, local people resort to sorcery to deal with interpersonal conflict. In the case of the Peruvian family, the husband had been sleeping with another woman, who was jealous of his wife and who had hired a local shaman to hurt her. The wife was feeling sick and called the shaman to help.

This experience was the first time I witnessed a ceremony for the purpose of removing sorcery. Fascinated, I watched as events and activities I had only read about in ethnographies took place. For example, the shaman sucked out foreign objects from the patient's body, while at the same time making dramatic noises. These objects, for example a worm, were the materialization of the harmful intention of the sorcerer in the body of the patient. Before he sucked he would cough up the phlegm stored in his chest in order for it to absorb the negative stuff; without the phlegm they would just go into the shaman's body. The first time he sucked from the woman's chest and when he spitted he said that it was bitter. The brujo had put two worms in the woman's body and they were the ones causing the damage. However, because the worms cannot defend themselves he had also placed two snakes in her body that were supposed to defend the worms. When he tried to suck the worms, one

of the snakes tried to bite his face. After this, he sent two of his own snakes and they ate the snakes of the brujo. The shaman said that he had never seen something like this before and that apparently this brujo was very skilled. After the snakes were killed, he found the entrance points of the snakes and the worms and he took them out. He said that after that he sucked until he saw light throughout the patient's body and coming out of the hole or entrance point. He also made strange noises, as he blew away the enemy shaman and his helpers, who were attacking.

He shared that when he was fighting the brujo he was almost hypnotized by him with an icaro. It was really hard for him and for a while he had a hard time controlling his body. Then a spirit slapped him on his neck and told him that the brujo was trying to hypnotize him. Somehow he managed to steal this icaro from him and then sang it. One of the participants recognized it as the icaro of a shaman he knew, so they were able to identify who it was. The shaman returned this icaro to the spirits but said that he can take it back any time he wants.

Additionally, toward the end of the ceremony, the shaman announced that I had been bewitched by the female shaman, who, he claimed, had placed a "spiritual diamond" in front of my eyes so that I could not have visions with ayahuasca. The inability to have visions during ceremony had been a problem for me for quite a while, but, as usual, I thought it was due to my skepticism and academic approach, rather than to any external interference. The shaman said he took the diamond away and asked the spirits to give me my own diamond. They gave me a beautiful necklace with a chain made of medicinal flowers and a big diamond hanging on my

chest. He told me that this diamond is mine for protection and nobody can take it away. He said that shamans like that do not like people to go where they want in their visions. They only want them to go where they can control them, where they know the territory well and have spirits to help them. So they will put restrictions on them and not let them go to the whole universe and the infinite.

The reference to the diamond reminded me of an event during a ceremony in which I took part with the female shaman. During that ceremony, she told me to visualize a diamond, and she asked me what color it was. She presented this exercise in a positive light, and she told me that the diamond was mine for some purpose I cannot recall. The American shaman did not know about this previous ceremony. Furthermore, he said that the female shaman had also sent a boa to our ceremony, which was circling me, but that she did not have much power to attack. Again, I listened with intellectual curiosity, but I had no way to make sense of what was said. I had entered a world I thought only existed in indigenous cultures.

He also spoke of the morals and ethic in the medicine practiced by the lineage of shamans he belonged to and said that for example, he cannot attack a shaman unless he is attacked by him first. Even if he is healing a patient of witchcraft, if the shaman who caused the witchcraft does not fight he cannot attack him. He said that battles at this level look like some of the battle scenes in the “Lord of the Rings” movies. There are millions of warrior spirits fighting on each side and the shaman is like the general of their army. Once he had an army of skeleton soldiers coming down a hill and a number of shamans were waiting for them at the

bottom. They became huge and they struck his soldiers with big bats and shuttered them. He said that sometimes they come at him with fire or explosives; the only limit in this type of warfare is the imagination of the shaman.

In the end, it took two ceremonies to clean the Peruvian family's house from sorcery. The culprit shaman was identified and defeated, and balance was restored. Apparently, the culprit was someone I had met, someone who worked with a lot with tourists and who, I was told, liked to steal their vital energy, or soul, and feed from it. The American shaman was able to release some of that stolen energy, and he then declared that the family's house was cleaned from sorcery and full of "medicine".

The next couple of ceremonies I attended were conducted by the European apprentice, who I informed about my experiences. They were particularly difficult ceremonies for me, as I experienced violent vomiting and visions for the first time in months. The shaman spent a lot of time singing over me and tapping my head with the ruda. The icaro was about warriors as I remember and at the moment I suspected that he thought I was under attack. Later, when he came and blew agua florida on us he told me "this woman does not like you at all". I asked who he meant but he did not respond. After these ceremonies I was declared cured, but informed that the female shaman was still trying to interfere in our ceremony. The shaman said that when he tried to blow smoke on me, a tarantula, presumably sent by her, attacked him. He said that it was really dark and had eyes of *wairuro*<sup>40</sup>. After the ceremony, another participant said that when I was purging, he tried to send me good energy,

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<sup>40</sup> This is a red or dark orange seed with a black spot on it, possibly one of the *Erythrina spp.* It is used in sorcery and in crafts as beads.

but a dark figure in front of me would not let that energy reach me. An interesting fact is that she had appeared in my visions as well that night, during which I thanked her for one piece of advice that she had once given me and then said goodbye.

This was not the last I heard of sorcery. Two more stories from my last trip are also compelling. At the time, I was working more closely with the American shaman and his teacher. They had a new apprentice, who came to them after having been bewitched by another shaman. (He explained his experience of bewitching, stating that when they tried to perform a blessing on him, he started vomiting violently, a sure sign of sorcery. This indicated to them that his body was expelling the malevolent energy put there by the other shaman.) One of the shamans' patients was a young British man, who had a serious skin condition that Western doctors were unable to heal. The British man claimed his condition originated when he was participating in a local ceremony in Africa, and he stepped on a powerful amulet. He had been in Peru for months trying to remove the sorcery that caused his condition, but, apparently, African sorcery is very powerful and difficult to reverse.

Sorcery was also discussed frequently in the Third Amazonian Shamanism Conference in Iquitos, in 2007, which was the reason for my visit. I overheard participants conferring about which shamans were safe and which they suspected to be *brujos*. I realized that in the last two years something had started to shift. Sorcery now is increasingly addressed among westerners as a factor in their experiences, even though many people still interpret such experiences with regard to the experiencer's psyche, or view sorcery as an anomaly, not seeing it as part of the

“real” ayahuasca experience. For many people a real shaman should be, above all, a healer.

Several authors who have related sorcery and witchcraft to social and political processes have indicated that inequalities seem to be the crux of sorcery accusations. Numerous examples appear in recent literature of shamans attacking one another, often resulting in death. Most of these shamans had been working with Western tourists (Beyer 2009). Perruchon (2003) relates the recent increase in sorcery accusations among the Shuar to increasing urbanism, consumerism and inequalities in the distribution of goods. We need to entertain the possibility that tourism, by creating opportunities for some local shamans, creates inequalities and jealousy that might in turn cause more sorcery attacks and accusations. It is true that in the West we have had a long and troubled relationship with shamanism, and, as several scholars have discussed (Znamenski 2007; Narby and Huxley 2001), that relationship has evolved over time only to reflect our own preoccupations, rather than to enlighten us about shamanism itself. I see shamanic tourism as the most recent chapter in this ambivalent relationship. I believe that in the West people have been so preoccupied with healing and personal growth through shamanism that they have neglected to see its other side, and how both sides are intertwined.

## PART III: Ritual and Self

### Chapter 7: Reconfiguring the Self

*It is almost 7:00 p.m. and a group of westerners is sitting in the common area of a jungle retreat outside of Iquitos. The building is a huge rectangular “maloca”<sup>41</sup> with a roof made of palm leaves. They are sitting around a table on metal rocking chairs made locally and conversation is rare. They are all nervous about their first ayahuasca ceremony. Some of their fellow travelers are already in the round ceremony house where the ayahuasca ceremony will take place. The few that are here are making jokes about the impossibility to prepare oneself for an ayahuasca experience.*

*As the time is closing in, they will make the short walk to the ceremony house together and settle in their respective seats. Shoes are not allowed in the ceremonial house. On the perimeter of the maloca individual mattresses are set up equipped with sheets, pillows, plastic buckets and the indispensable toilet paper roll. In the middle of the room 6 chairs are placed where the shamans and apprentices are meant to sit. Some are already there. In front of the chairs on the floor is the altar, or mesa, a collection of various seemingly unrelated objects placed on a large square cloth. On one side of the room are the bathrooms and next to them the “helpers” are going to sit. Their job is to assist the participants to the bathrooms, replace the*

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<sup>41</sup> The common type of house in the jungle made of wood, on stilts, and with a roof made of palm leaves.



*buckets as well as pour water on the heads of anyone who needs it.*

*It's hard not to notice the uneasiness that permeates the air. As everyone is settling down, the shamans are slowly coming in as well. Soon they will bless the ceremonial space and start dispensing the brew.*

The above describes the tension just before a typical ayahuasca ceremony in the context of shamanic tourism. I often noticed this apprehension, and felt it myself, just before each ceremony. I naturally wondered why would someone put themselves through such a challenging experience and risk having a horrific night, over and over again. Sometimes people would hold hands and encourage each other before a ceremony, others would meditate or pray. Others would chat nervously and joke about the impending journey on which they were about to embark. They wished each other good luck hoping that this would be a good night. Over time I came to realize that almost every night was perceived to be a good night in the end. Even the most challenging experiences seemed to have a beneficial effect; especially difficult experiences seemed to have the most transformative effect on the participant. Thus, the concept of the “bad trip” has a very different meaning for ayahuasca partakers.

One of the most commonly reported benefits of the participation in ayahuasca ceremonies among westerners is self-transformation. In fact, through the numerous reports shared on the internet or some popular articles (e.g. Salak 2006) this metanarrative of the often radical transformation of the self has become part of the ayahuasca mystique and the reason why many people will seek it in the first place.

The possibility to radically transform and reconfigure the self has become so attractive that some centers specializing in ayahuasca retreats emphasize this as a central aspect of the experience. As discussed earlier, participants have mentioned in interviews that it is an aspect even more important than visions and find that the act of stepping outside of one's culture, as well as the structure of the ritual provide the best context for this transformation. In numerous interviews with westerners in the field the common theme was that Western people take ayahuasca to "find themselves", or rather the elusive core self; they felt that Western culture in addition to discouraging people from discovering themselves, is lacking in utilizing ritual in any constructive way. Thus, in order to find these things they had to step outside of their culture and experience what they perceived as timeless rituals. The use of a powerful psychedelic further facilitated this by challenging their very cultural categories.

I will begin this chapter with a discussion of shamanic apprenticeship as a radical transformation of the individual, focusing on cases of westerners who turned into shamans. I will then present some of the ways that the self has been conceived in the West. I will follow with a discussion of ayahuasca rituals focusing on the ways ritual facilitates this transformation and the ways it is perceived in the context of shamanic tourism. I will close the chapter with a discussion of the transformation of the self based on interviews with westerners participating in shamanic tourism.

Through personal stories and descriptions of rituals, I will show the ways in which the ayahuasca experience facilitates a shift in ideas about selfhood. The

expensive trip to Peru is rarely pursued merely to sample a potent hallucinogen, but it also aims to a personal transformation aided by the removal from the world and one's ordinary life. The transformation that occurs does not only include life-changing decisions and changes in life course but also a shift in one's personal paradigm, in the way that they perceive themselves and the world, which often includes seeing to see themselves as distinct from other beings by dissolving self boundaries. The ritual structure, the challenge of being in the jungle and receiving teaching in a non-verbal way seem to present the perfect context for reflection. This experience is then integrated in one's life history in a variety of ways and often it occupies a pivotal position in it. The tourists' motives are far from naïve and there is a level of eclectic and often conscious selection of elements from native spirituality and combined with elements from other spiritual traditions, they create a unique and dynamic discourse.

### **From apprentice to shaman**

Reading the literature on shamanism in various cultures from around the world the importance of initiation becomes apparent. The initial call of shamans varies from culture to culture; Eliade mentions two ways of becoming a shaman: hereditary transmission and spontaneous vocation, while self-made shamans are generally considered less powerful. In Oceania before becoming a shaman one has to go through a period of crisis, during which "the future mediator between people and deities was abstracted from the ordinary human world and taken away by the etua

(deities)” (Thomas 1994:20). During this time the person would exhibit erratic behavior and signs of possession. After this phase was terminated through an offering, the official priests would recognize the new shaman.

Spending some time away from society and “normalcy” is a common requirement for the future shaman. For Mary Douglas “ritual recognizes the potency of disorder. In the disorder of the mind, in dreams, faints and frenzies, ritual expects to find powers and truths which cannot be reached by conscious effort. Energy to command and special powers of healing come to those who can abandon rational control for a time” (1966:94). She bases this on the numerous examples from several cultures where the shaman or ritual specialist has to spend time outside the borders of what is considered normal behavior before he or she can gain the knowledge and power to heal. This is clear in shamanic initiation. As she puts it “going mad in the bush” is a common way of acquiring such skills. Later she states that in these beliefs there is a double play on inarticulateness. First there is a venture into the disordered regions of the mind. Second there is the venture beyond the confines of society. The man who comes back from these inaccessible regions brings with him a power not available to those who have stayed in the control of themselves and of society. [Douglas 1966:95]

Around Iquitos, the apprenticeship is a vital part of a shaman’s credentials and the lineage of healers they belong to is very important as there are significant differences between lineages. What is transmitted through the lineage is esoteric knowledge, ceremonial practices as well as other “property” or powers. Around the world, one is considered a shaman after they have received two kinds of teaching:

ecstatic (in dreams and trances) and traditional, such as shamanic techniques (Eliade 1951). The first one is given by the spirits and the second one by the master shaman. The training of the shaman requires fasting, vomiting and sexual abstinence (Hugh-Jones 1982) and the novice must obtain several spiritual weapons and tools of office. In Amazonia the novice also consumes strong hallucinogens and must master the trance state (Reichel-Dolmatoff 1971); all this in isolation from the community and spending long periods of time in the jungle. During this time the apprentice disconnects from society and comes closer to nature and the spirits from which he or she learns. Icaros and some of the shaman's powers are being passed on by the teacher to the student, an example being the yachay (the phlegm discussed in chapter 6). A relationship with certain plant spirits is also expected; a respected shaman is someone who has received powers from his master shaman as well as the spirits of the plants directly.

Shamanic initiation radically transforms the person who becomes initiated, but this transformation is not easy. The future shaman usually undergoes a crisis or an illness and a series of challenges before they are initiated and in many cases they do not seem to have an option once they have been called by the spirits. Amazonian shamanism is a bit different in this respect as usually becoming a shaman is voluntary and is the result of years of training and isolation. In this context the word apprenticeship is more appropriate than initiation, as there is a long training period before someone becomes a master shaman and it is a gradual process to get there. In the context of mestizo shamanism, shamanic knowledge is a combination of internal

propensity and apprenticeship and acquired knowledge. In this manner, a good shaman should have both the gift and a good teacher and they are expected to add their own creative touch to the teachings they receive. None of the shamans I worked with displayed erratic behavior before the beginning of their apprenticeship in the way that Eliade describes; rather some of them were seriously ill and started their apprenticeship after their recovery with the help of a master shaman. In all cases there was a radical transformation of that individual who changed their life course and became more confident. The Peruvian shamans I worked with all started their apprenticeship after a life-threatening disease that was healed by a shaman—a theme very common in the literature as well. I will focus on two Western shamans, with whom I worked closely, whose stories are a bit different in that in addition to healing, they reveal a series of events that “led” them to become shamans—almost as if it was their fate. The names I use are pseudonyms and I have changed some of the personal details to protect their privacy.

### **Juan**

Juan—from Europe—used to be a drug addict, an anarchist, an atheist, and a drug dealer. His story is one of a radical shift in priorities and direction in the course of his life. When telling his story he says that back then nobody loved him because he did not love himself. He found out about ayahuasca when one of his friends, who usually supplied him with hashish, came to Peru and became a shaman. When he went back he told him about ayahuasca and he suggested taking it “to come out of the shit he was in”. Juan did

not believe him and he told him to “go to hell”. After a night of a lot of cocaine and alcohol he had nightmares of monsters attacking him. Then he saw his friend with a bottle of ayahuasca telling him that he had to drink it to escape from all that. He found his friend and told him that he would try it even though he did not believe him. In the first ceremony he did not have any visions, while in the second one he noticed that the others were having a hard time and he wanted to hurt his friend because he felt he was responsible for that. When he tried to get up something pulled him back and he heard a voice telling him that he was the only bad person there. He started looking for where the voice came from. Then what he thought was blood started running down his nose and it smelled like cocaine and alcohol. He then called his friend who told him that it was not blood; he only thought that it was. When he thought of drugs he started vomiting and he vomited a whole bucket of a black, smelly liquid. After this he followed the diet for eight days and he did not take any more drugs nor did he have the urge to do so. In the third ceremony he started having visions. He saw an anaconda coming to him and then it turned into a woman that embraced him. The woman was ayahuasca. Then he entered the snake which subsequently turned into a hawk. After this, he flew and he saw Peru, including the place where he later dieted to become a shaman.

He worked with three shamans before he met the master shaman that became his teacher. He said that during his apprenticeship his teacher always let him free. When other shamans would attack, Juan would try to deal with it on his own and afterwards his teacher would ask him why he did not ask him for help. He would answer that he

could do it on his own. Then sometimes he called for his help but his teacher would not come. Sometimes he saw his teacher open a small window, look at him and laugh and then he would close it and leave him alone—because he had tremendous faith in him. He would just check on him and leave him alone. This gave him back his self-esteem and he often talks about self-esteem being one of the most important things that ayahuasca has to teach. One night after a ceremony he told me that ayahuasca had told him to tell me to believe in myself. Today he leads ceremonies in Europe and he also helps with a program for rehabilitation of drug addicts. He takes some of them out and he tells them his story; they have seen enormous progress with some of them.

### **Herbert**

Herbert is an American who starts his story after he finished college. He was young and looking for direction in his life, but the turning point in his story is of a spiritual nature. He says “I didn't really have great direction at that point, what I was going to do with my future. I had plans, I had a job set up in Colombia, I was going to move there and things fell through at the last minute. And so I went back to the U.S. and I lived with my mom and she had become very spiritual in the previous years, when I was in the university. Before that my family was not very open to spiritual practice, in my childhood. And I started to do energetic work and spiritual work, and over a period of time—of a number of a few months—I ended up having spontaneous connections with spirits. I started seeing spirits in San Antonio. I would see them in my house, I'd see them when I'd drive, I'd see them everywhere I went. And I knew that I wasn't taking



any drugs, I wasn't taking any spiritual medicines, I wasn't taking anything to be seeing this stuff. This was just a time in my life, I was just, sort of, by what the Western world would call, quite normal. Other than being lost and trying to figure out what to do with my future. But I wasn't participating in any drugs, at that time I drank alcohol recreationally. And so to try and make head and tails of this, of the experience of seeing these spirits, I started to, with the help of my mom, investigating shamanism.

And over the course of a short period of time, I would say about, from the time I first started seeing spirits—I would say five to six months—I put myself in trance, I could connect through drumming journeys into the world of spirit. I had met and worked with a number of spirit guides and power animals. At the time I was thinking of moving to Brazil, I wanted to learn Portuguese and finish a book that I was writing, a manuscript I was working on. I went into journey to ask about that trip and the spirits came to me and they said that I wasn't going to Brazil, I was moving to Peru. And that in Peru I would find an apprenticeship and that there was a shaman waiting for me to arrive, who'd end up becoming the master shaman with whom I'd apprentice and that I would live a traditional apprenticeship and become a master shaman. I didn't really believe them, so I had all the normal doubts that someone would have with very little shamanic experience. And they told me to look on a certain website and I would find a ticket for half price throughout that week—if I kept looking. So I did. And sure enough on the third or fourth night I found a ticket that was half price. And it allowed me the ninety day stay. They told me that if I went to Peru and back out of Peru in ninety days

I would find the apprenticeship. And it turned out that the ticket allowed me the exact 90 day stay that they said that I would need to use. And so I purchased the ticket and I decided to get ready to go to Peru. I came here looking for this prophesized apprenticeship that was supposed to manifest in 90 days, not knowing anybody here, not having any clue about how to do it”.

“I flew to Lima and then to Cusco, I actually came to Iquitos last. [...] But I had very strong visions of a name of a man, of a name that I'd seen in a guide book as the man that I had to be in contact with. No other guide, no other shaman was gonna work—it had to be this guy. Even though there was a heavy rumor that the guy was kind of a swindler. He was a guide that was quite famous from the late 60s, 70s and 80s, for sort of pioneering the jungle adventure tourism. Anyway, I knew I had to contact him, I knew that he was the only guide that was going to be able to help me find the people that I needed to find. I knew nothing about Iquitos, nothing about the ayahuasca culture here. And I knew I wasn't going to be in Iquitos either. I organized a trip with his son and they took me to an area of the jungle were today I have my camp and they were the only tour operators that took people into that area and that's the area where I found the master shamans that were going to work with me. So I went and I drank in my first ayahuasca ceremony and I saw in the ceremony that that was something so totally different and so completely extreme in terms of its power and its healing, that it was a medicine that I knew I needed to study. Although at the time I was not convinced I would ever become a master ayahuasquero. But I knew I needed to study it and follow

an apprenticeship”.

Subsequently, he talks about how he experienced the beginning of his apprenticeship in vision:

“I remember the first day—the first ceremony I took—I was transported between two gateways, and one was into this incredibly divine beautiful place of healing where all of my ancestors were and family and divine spirits and the other one was this gateway of total insanity. And then I was told I had to make the choice of where I would go, and if I could make the choice into the left hand side, which is the divinity and everything, I would have made it into my apprenticeship. And then I would find clarity and understanding and healing in there. So I obviously through ego in that moment, I was oh yeah, let me go left, let me just go into the perfect divine place. And I hit a transparent barrier—invisible barrier—and I couldn't get out. And then the tunnel of total demise and insanity just started spinning, trying to pull me in. Then at the same time the voices, the spirits, came and said, ‘now it's time for you to do your work’. And I remember screaming out in my mind, ‘what's the work’, and then it just happened. I just knew right in the moment everything I had to do, the thoughts I needed to purge, the negative experiences I'd had, the traumas that I was holding onto, the people I had to forgive. And this went on for about four hours, at the same time accompanied by tremendous vomiting and also diarrhea. I didn't think I would be normal again. It was unbelievably strong—what was happening. And I spent the first two hours saying, ‘I'm never doing this again’. Whenever I had a break, I said ‘I'm never doing this again’; ‘I'm

never doing this again'. And then, the healing would take place again and then after the last time I finally vomited, the gate was finally opened up and I walked into that area and I was welcomed and all the spirits welcomed me and I knew I had found my apprenticeship. It was an incredibly amazing thing. And in it tremendous healing took place for me. I had a negative self image that was completely released in the ceremony. I had also incredible shyness about my physical body—I had tremendous issues about my own nudity—and all of that was taken away from that one ceremony. And it hasn't come back”.

A central theme in both of these stories is that physical, psychological and spiritual cleansing preceded the beginning of the apprenticeship. The future shamans had to purge all dark and negative elements before they could become healers and accept the spirits of the plants and their teachings in their bodies. I already discussed this element of purification in the previous chapter, but it is an important step for self-transformation as well. In addition, the future shaman has to suffer and sometimes even experience death and rebirth as found in many cultures around the world (Dobkin de Rios 1984). Another important part of the process is sacrifice in the form of strict dietary and sexual prohibitions. Traditionally shamans would undergo extensive periods of fasting called *dietas* (diets). The practice of *dietas* by individuals who do not have the intention of becoming *curanderos* is a new phenomenon. Today this is something that is available to westerners and some people will choose to undergo a *dieta* while participating in ayahuasca ceremonies.

Note that dieta is not the same as the ayahuasca diet that has to be observed by everyone who intends to drink ayahuasca.

## **Shamanic dietas as a tool for transformation and knowledge acquisition**

Plant dietas can be done for two reasons—to be healed or to “learn medicine”. The principle behind it is fairly simple: the shaman or patient or anyone who wants to acquire knowledge from the plants ingests one or more plants and they follow a strict dietary regimen for a period of time ranging from a week to a few months. The dieta starts with being really strict and gradually decreases in strictness allowing the person to eat or drink more things. It is generally good to ease back into a regular diet. Plant dietas are rather tedious and physically challenging since most of the plants ingested have noticeable effects on the body, especially when one is fasting, meaning eating most likely only rice and plantains or manioc. Ideally during the dieta the person is not to have vigorous physical activity and they are expected to spend most of their time lying in their hammock or bed—in other words they are supposed to behave like a sick person. Some consultants have said that any kind of activity even reading and writing as well as contact with other people should be avoided. This is especially important for apprentices, but today is often not adhered to given the practical challenges.

According to some, to be a traditional ayahuasquero dietas are not necessary. The traditional ayahuasca shaman will only learn from ayahuasca and work with

ayahuasca. Ayahuasqueros are considered by other specialists in the area to be weak and very easy to dominate. They only cook the brew with ayahuasca and chacruna sometimes adding small amounts of tobacco and toé. However, for ayahuasqueros paleros, the dietas of the trees are the most fundamental aspect of their practice. By ingesting tree barks they allow the spirits of the trees to enter their bodies and teach them directly. The greatest learning takes place within the period of the dieta, while during the ceremonies they learn how to utilize that medicine.

There are a number of principles, restrictions and plants that are followed by most of the shamans in the area but different lineages of shamans will have their own rules or plants that they diet. This is because each shaman works with different spirits, which may ask them to do things a certain way. Even within a lineage there may be differences if the spirits impose different requirements on different shamans. Most diets last 8, 15 or 30 days, even though it is said that a few decades ago shamans would diet for 6 months to a year at a time. One of my consultants said that his first diet was 30 days. Today this is rare and it is more common to diet for an eight day period during which one drinks plants on the first four to five nights. Even if they diet for longer, they only drink the plants on the first four to five nights and some maestros will only give the plants on the first day. After that point the dieta will continue, by following the dietary restrictions. Things that are not allowed are sugar, alcohol, sex, pork, salt, spicy food and drugs. Some consultants have said that the exclusion of these elements from the body allows the human spirit, body and mind to be more open to the forest and the plants' teachings.

In addition to rice, plantains and *fariña* (manioc flour), some species of birds and fish are allowed. I was told that any fish with teeth is not allowed because they eat “*basura*” (garbage). Another shaman said that the reason they do not eat fish with teeth is because they are aggressive. Fish with vivid colors or shapes on them are also not allowed to avoid the dieter’s skin taking on these colors. The idea is that when one diets they are ingesting not only the meat of the animal, but also its spirit. On the other hand if one wants to be a *brujo* or sorcerer they might want to eat fish with teeth to take on their aggressiveness. According to one of my consultants “to become a healing shaman, you will follow a very strict diet that will direct you into a place of pure medicine. In that place of medicine you’ll learn how to defend yourself, what they call *defensivas*. But that comes from medicine, it doesn’t come from dark spirits”.

During the period of the *dieta* the spirits of the trees or plants will enter the dieter’s body, where they will start the teaching literally from the inside out. They will also come to the person during their dream time and teach them. The person is not supposed to do any activity unless the plant they diet requires them to bathe a certain number of times in a day. In that case they are allowed to go to the river and bathe and then continue to lie down. If the diet is broken, the teaching will stop and sometimes consequences will occur. Usually the person faces the consequences the next time they drink *ayahuasca*, during their visions—meaning that they will suffer and they will be in a sense punished by the spirits.

There is a disagreement on the number of plants that is ideal to diet at any

given time. Most shamans will diet one plant at a time and learn from its spirit. I have worked with one shaman that diets as many as 25 plants at a time, a fact that is frowned upon by other shamans and experienced users. They argued that it would be impossible to learn anything if you had so many teachers trying to teach you at the same time. For them it is optimal to diet one plant at a time and concentrate on the energy of the particular plant.

Different plants are considered to teach different things and certain plants are more suitable for certain people. Some of the common plants that people will diet are: ajo sachá, ayahuma, tortuga, punga negra, punga amarilla, huayracaspi, lupuna blanca, capirona, huaca purana, huacapú, bombinsana, chullachaqui caspi, cumaceba, tamimuri, chuchuhuasi and remocaspi<sup>42</sup>. Each plant has certain properties and distinct teachings to offer. For example, ajo sachá is a plant that is said to treat problems of discomfort and general pain, generates heat in the body and reinforces overall physical strength. There is no standard way for choosing which plant to diet. If a person is dieting for healing they need to diet the plant that the spirits will indicate to the shaman. Usually at the beginning of the diet an ayahuasca ceremony is done and the shaman determines which plant or plants the patient should diet. More experienced users might receive that information by ayahuasca themselves and they share that with the shaman.

Most people will participate in ayahuasca ceremonies during a dieta. This is considered dangerous, because it puts the dieter in a very vulnerable position as

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<sup>42</sup> For the botanical names of these plants see Appendix 3.



ayahuasca opens the person up into the spiritual world—whereas the dieta does not. I was told that if there is a rival shaman or negative energy in the area, they will not be able to “see” the dieter—he or she will not come into their awareness. But when one participates in ayahuasca ceremonies rival shamans can hear the icaros, they can hear the ceremony vibrating and see the mesa shining. In a way it is safer not to drink ayahuasca during the time of the dieta. However, if one is working with master shamans, it is considered reasonably safe to drink ayahuasca during the dieta, because they are watching over the dieter and are able to protect them.

Other things not allowed during the dieta are: soap or toothpaste, and direct physical contact with others—except the shaman or other dieteros. After the dieta, no sexual contact—including masturbation—is allowed for 30 days, and pork is not allowed for at least six months. During the dieta one should avoid the sun as well as any strenuous activity and should remain isolated as much as possible. For this reason dieters will usually stay in a small hut in the jungle called *tambo* for most of the duration of the dieta. It was said to me that during the dieta one feels closer to the jungle and the plants and animals and it can be difficult to return to normal life especially to an urban environment. After a dieta a person is very open to anything and the negative energy of a city can affect them much more than it would have before they dieted.

### **Theories of the self**

The concept of the self has been approached differently by different cultures

and historical times. According to Geertz,

the Western conception of the person as a bounded, unique, more or less integrated motivational and cognitive universe, a dynamic center of awareness, emotion, judgment, and action organized into a distinctive whole and set contrastively both against other such wholes and against its social and natural background, is, however, incorrigible it may seem to us, a rather peculiar idea within the context of the world's cultures. [Geertz 1983:59]

Even though, as discussed in the introduction, the self in the West has been generally perceived as bounded and individual, there is actually great variation within the Western intellectual tradition (Morris 1991). It is not the scope of this study to review this variation in depth but it suffices to say that there have been challenges to the Cartesian dichotomy between subject and object within Western tradition. Thus the rebellion against the bounded, egocentric self is not something new in the West. I will only summarize some of these ideas here, as we might recognize some of these from the ayahuasca users' discourse.

### **The self in philosophy**

Some of the ideas about self-improvement and cultivation of the self can be traced to a long tradition of spiritual cultivation of the Self inherited from Greek philosophy. Greeks were particularly concerned with knowledge about the self—everyone is familiar with Socrates' quote “know thyself”. Socrates also is quoted in his Apology to have said that “an unexamined life is not worth living” (Foucault 1988). Socrates advocated “spiritual exercises” implying, among other things, “soul-journeys”, with the aim of “self-improvement”, “self-development” and “self-

transformation”. Zeno and Musonius we are also concerned with cultivating the soul. This cultivation of the self is dominated by the principle that one must take care of oneself (Foucault 1988). For the Epicureans, philosophy was an exercise of the care of oneself, of the well-being of the soul. Similar ideas can be found in Epictetus and Seneca. For Epictetus, “the care of the self is a privilege-duty that ensures our freedom while forcing us to take ourselves as the object of all our diligence” (Foucault 1988:47). Thus, the pursuit of shamanic experience in the framework of self cultivation could be seen as the continuation in the pursuit of an old philosophical ideal in Western philosophical tradition, the ideal of self-knowledge.

Of particular interest for this study are Plato’s ideas about the self. Not only did he focus on self-mastery, but distinguished between lower and higher parts of the soul (Taylor 1989). To be a master of oneself one had to have reason (the higher part of the soul) dominate over desires. This idea of self-control is also common in Amazonian shamanism and has been outlined in chapter 6. As Taylor puts it “the mastery of self through reason brings with it these three fruits: unity with oneself, calm, and collected self-possession” (1989:116). The above are the goals that the shamanic apprentice, as well as participants, are encouraged to strive for—not to be controlled by desires but to find happiness and fulfillment in themselves as well as loving themselves and life. In the context of shamanic tourism, even though the concept of the higher self was mentioned, it was not associated with reason but with a higher spiritual self outside the realm of culture—the eternal self that is not shaped by culture and lives on after death. In fact rationality was considered stifling to

creativity and self actualization, and intuition was favored more. This dualism in itself though might be a fallacy.

The Western conception of the self has been mostly influenced by the Western philosophical tradition of duality and extreme individualism. It is the conception of an “individuated being separate from the social and the natural world, materialistic and rationalistic” (Morris 1994:16). In the classic Western philosophical tradition the individual is poised defensively against society. For example Kant stresses the dualistic idea of self as subject and object, while Descartes is known for this quote “cogito ergo sum”, emphasizing reflexivity as an important aspect of the self. Descartes is also considered responsible for introducing the mind–body dichotomy, while in fact he was the one who situated the moral source within the self (Taylor 1989) and focused on self-sufficient knowledge and will.

During the romantic era self-actualization became an important issue. According to the romanticist view, each person has personal depth, passion, soul, creativity and moral fiber (Gergen 1991). Life away from society free from the harmful effects of civilization, was the only possibility for the true fulfillment of the self. This idea might seem very familiar in the context of shamanic tourism.

In modernity two notions of the self dominate; one is the autonomous self, separated from the world, and the other is the self-defining, expressive essence version (Taylor 1989). The Self has a hidden quality, is never seen, but assumed to be there. The chief characteristics of the modern self reside in our ability to reason, in our beliefs, opinions and conscious intentions (Gergen 1991). In modernity we

also see an objectification of the self, the idea that the self can be fixed (Giddens 1991) and a separation of the self into both subject and object—this separation enabling the self to be improved. Foucault (2003 [1973]) argued that the objectification of the self demarcates one's modernity, but so does the search for its transcendence in attempts to recapture an earlier, more complete way of being.

All participants in ayahuasca ceremonies seek in some way to do exactly the above, transcend the self, transform it and return to an idyllic earlier situation. Ayahuasca ritual is instrumental in this process. The psychedelic experience is perceived to be one of the ways the self resists the claims and assaults of society—creating a new self definition—allowing the self to resist the forces that seek to subjugate it. The people that pursue ayahuasca experiences are seeking an alternative to the technological and consumerist models of creating and negotiating the self. People are not satisfied by identifying themselves with what they own or even what their abilities or achievements are. They are looking for an essential “core of the self”, a part that is hidden and is untouched by the material or even the cultural. Thus, it is clear that even though the pursuit of finding the self outside Western culture is perceived as an anti-modern pursuit, I show that it is actually a very modern era idea and is consistent with romanticism and with Western individualism.

### **The self in psychology**

Something that is important among ayahuasca users is the spiritual dimension of the self, an aspect that, along with a focus on subjective experience, was important

for James and Jung. In fact, Jung's ideas might be the most influential among Western ayahuasca users. James (1920) argued that our waking consciousness is one of many potential types of consciousness and that these other types of consciousness could have useful applications. In fact he said that "no account of the universe in its totality can be final which leaves these other forms of consciousness quite disregarded" (1920:388). Even though he acknowledged the importance of other states of consciousness he did admit the difficulty of approaching such states, since they are so radically different from ordinary consciousness.

James (1890) also identified the components which make up the self; he calls them, the material self, the social self, the spiritual self, and the pure ego. In his own words "By the spiritual self, so far as it belongs to the empirical me, I mean a man's inner or subjective being, his psychic faculties or dispositions, taken concretely; not the bare principle of personal unity, or 'pure' ego" (1890:296). He locates the self in the bodily sensations.

At present, then, the only conclusion I come to is the following: that the part of the innermost self which is most vividly felt turns out to consist for the most part of a collection of cephalic movements of 'adjustments' which, for want of attention and reflection, usually fail to be perceived and classed as what they are; that over and above there is an obscurer feeling of something more; but whether it be of fainter physiological processes, or of nothing objective at all, but rather of subjectivity as such, of thought become 'its own object', must at present remain an open question. [James 1890:305]

For James and Jung the self is not a stable and unchanged agent but is a constantly renewed—perhaps even recreated—agent. This might be because a big part of the self is unknowable. For Jung,

as an empirical concept, the self designates the whole range of psychic phenomena in man. It expresses the unity of the personality as a whole. ... it is a *transcendental* concept, for it presupposes the existence of unconscious factors on empirical grounds and thus characterizes an entity that can be described only in part, but for the other part, remains at present unknowable and illimitable. [Jung 1971:789]

The Self, according to Jung, is realized through individuation, which is the process of integrating one's personality. Jung also used the term individuation "process by which a person becomes an individual, that is a separate, indivisible unity or whole" (1966:275), to mean self-realization but did not mean ego-development. He means a self deeper than the ego—which includes the ego—and he sometimes called it psyche instead of the self. Individuation is the process by which one differentiates their psyche from the collective, while becoming conscious that this deeper self is not one's persona and that it is distinct from social roles and expectations. Individuation also means wholeness and implies a conscious struggle to balance competing and opposing forces in the psyche.

For Jung, this intentional individuation process has spiritual overtones. The archetypal self is the totality of the conscious and the unconscious—the psychic totality of the person—and is far greater than the ego can conceive. The archetypal self is never experienced directly, but through representations and images, found in different cultures—such as the mandalas. It has been argued (Smith 1997) that spirits in shamanism can be a different way of discussing psychological complexes, and for example demonic possession is nothing more than autonomous complexes that have taken over control of the Ego (Jung 2001). Jung's therapeutic solution was to make

these complexes conscious. This means more than gaining knowledge of them, but “requires courageous effort, a strong ego and the capacity to accept suffering, which facing of complexes entails” (Smith 1997:131).

All this shows that the Western approach to ayahuasca healing and transforming the self is deeply influenced by Jungian psychology and converges with the shamanic paradigm of spirits and sentient beings in the context of shamanic tourism. Jung’s approach was that of integration while the shaman’s approach is that of extraction or expulsion of the pathogenic force. For Jung the complex is a valuable part of the psyche and must not be removed, rather the goal is to restore harmony with the rest of the psyche.

In more recent developments in psychology, a new model of self is emerging, in which information—both conscious and unconscious—is processed both rationally and experientially. Curtis (1992:30) has argued that non-verbal experience, as opposed to logical or verbal interventions, seems to be more likely to change self-organization. He also argues for a model where “an awareness of a union with something larger than ourselves, would need to be valued as much as the awareness of our autonomy, agency and uniqueness” (Curtis 1992:31). Other psychologists are also looking at the potential benefits of ayahuasca in psychotherapy and have discussed the centrality of spirituality in this process (Trichter 2006).

### **The self and the New Age**

New Age is often said to be a form of self-spirituality. The New Age self is



not as bounded or stable as the modern self is perceived to be. According to Ivakhiv (2003) there are three kinds of New Age self. One is the “bounded, essential self that must guard against the threat of depletion or impurity” (Ivakhiv 2003:108), second is the multiple self with many subcomponents, including animal spirits and spirits guides, explored in the post-Jungian depth psychology (such as Estés 1992). This self seeks the connection to nature or the universe “perceived as constituting a multitude of archetypes or entities” (Ivakhiv 2003:108). Finally the cosmic self or higher self, thought to be rooted in the cosmos, “provides guidance for the development or ‘evolution’ of one’s spiritual growth” (108). According to this mode, the self is at the same time unified, multiple and evolving “connected to sources of energy much greater than the everyday self” (Ivakhiv 2003:109). In addition, Melton (1990) argues that a common theme in the New Age is the search for the primal experience of transformation both of the self and society. The higher self was often mentioned in conversations with Western participants in ayahuasca ceremonies. By participating in ayahuasca rituals westerners are able to tap into and connect to this higher self and utilize it as a source of guidance and wisdom. By transforming individual selves it was believed that eventually society will transform as well.

## **The Ritual**

For most of the people interviewed, there has been a sort of personal paradigm shift during their trip to Peru. They referred to “cultural programming” or “conditioning” and discussed the ways that ayahuasca rituals helped them break this

conditioning and recreate their new self. Participants in ayahuasca ceremonies experience liminality in two ways. Firstly, the ritual itself is a transition; it provides the liminal space, during which the normal perceptions of their life and the world are being challenged. Secondly, the entire trip to Peru is a liminal stage, during which they are separated from their regular life and after which they return home and are reintegrated into their lives, after having undergone a radical change. In this manner the trip to Peru could be paralleled to the separation period, the actual ritual or dieta, to the liminal stage, and their return to their regular life to the reintegration phase.

The fact that westerners have found this liminal space in a far away culture in a ritual that would be shocking to mainstream culture, is not unusual, as liminality is often constructed from the margins of culture. As I have already shown images of the timeless and exotic “other” become the vehicle of critique of the mainstream culture while at the same time become symbols of individualism. This has been the case in the past with countercultural movements. Turner (1969) described such social groupings and images as *anti-structure*, to indicate they are constructed in opposition to mainstream culture. The consumption of a hallucinogen in the specific ritual further facilitates this opposition.

Turner (1974) differentiated between *communitas* in tribal societies and in industrial societies, using the terms *liminal* and *liminoid*. While liminal spaces were associated with non-industrial societies and contribute to maintaining social order, liminoid phenomena are typically ones that do not reproduce social order but rather challenge it. In addition, they are associated with voluntary participation and

playfulness. In both cases there is a sense of timelessness. Turner argued that “communitas is almost always thought of or portrayed by actors as a timeless condition, an eternal now, as ‘a moment in and out of time’, or as a state to which the structural view of time is not applicable” (1974a:238). Whether ayahuasca ceremonies are liminal or liminoid spaces or something in between, it was clear that they were capable of creating communitas among the participants especially in contexts that focused on personal transformation and followed clear ritual structure. Even though these rituals could hardly be characterized as “play”, participation in them is voluntary, they are at the margins of culture for the time being and they most definitely challenge mainstream culture.

One can identify a pre-liminal phase which includes a period of strict dietary prohibitions, which have been discussed already. The ceremony itself can be seen as the liminal stage while afterwards follows a period that could be identified as post-liminal during which participants are expected to continue to observe certain dietary restrictions and continue working on their transformation and the integration of their experience. This can happen for example in dreams etc. In the course of an ayahuasca retreat many people have reported that they have radically transformed and have expressed this symbolically by changing their appearance in some radical way. I have witnessed two cases where people cut their hair right before or during an ayahuasca retreat. In one retreat a man came to breakfast one day having shaved his beard which he had had for years. He shared that in the last few ceremonies he had been through “shape shifting” and it was a spontaneous decision to shave his beard

that morning.

### **Ayahuasca preparation**

In some retreats, the participants have a chance to participate in the ayahuasca preparation. This way their preparation for ritual begins as well. In this section I will describe the way that the brew was prepared in the situations that I observed and will also discuss the different approaches to additive plants. However, this is not meant to be comprehensive, since there is a lot of variation in brew preparation in the area.

The preparation begins early in the morning and lasts all day, about 12 hours. Many shamans will buy the plants from the market or will have collected them beforehand and will begin the preparation right away. First, they will beat the vine with a heavy wooden mallet to facilitate the release of the alkaloids in the water during boiling. The shaman and any apprentices bless the pot with mapacho smoke. Then the vine pieces will be placed in large pots with the chacruna leaves, sometimes in alternating layers, and any other plants or barks are added as well. The pots are placed over a fire, filled with water and are left to boil for at least six to eight hours. After this, the brown liquid is strained and placed in a different pot to be boiled and reduced to the desired consistency which is usually thick and syrup like. Then the brew is cooled and transferred to bottles. Throughout this process mapacho smoke is used often to bless and cleanse all pots and utensils as well as the brew in different stages of the preparation. Some shamans mix any remaining ayahuasca brew with the

fresh brew to maintain continuity.

Many curanderos add a number of plants to the basic brew to achieve a variety of effects, depending on what the patient is trying to heal or what qualities they are trying to incorporate in the brew. Some have a list of admixture plants and barks that they always include in their ayahuasca brew. By adding these extra plants they incorporate the spirits and the properties of these plants to the brew. These plants and any plants used in this type of shamanism are used for their energy and their spirit as much as they are for their pharmacological qualities. In fact the difference between the two is not always clear. Plants are treated as living beings and their external characteristics reveal their spirit and qualities. Many tree barks that are used in the brew are used precisely for their strength and endurance that is revealed by their vertical shape. This has a symbolic meaning as well; just like the physical trees support the ayahuasca vine, the same way the barks from the trees in the brew support the vine spiritually.

For example here is a list of plants and trees<sup>43</sup> that are included in the brew and the properties they are meant to add to it: Mapacho—strength and protection, Toé—strength, Ayahuma—protection and healing susto, Capirona—cleansing and protection, Chullachaqui Caspi—physical cleansing and healing, Lupuna Blanca—protection, Punga Amarilla—protection and drawing out of negative spirits and energies, Remocaspi—moving dense or dark energies, Huayracaspi—create purging, help with gastro-intestinal ailments, bring mental calmness and tranquility, Uchu

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<sup>43</sup> For a full list of botanical names see appendix 4.

Sanango–protection , power and strength, Shiwawaku–healing and protection. It is obvious that protection from malevolent spirits and attacks from malevolent shamans is paramount and several of the additive plants aim to this.

Some shamans have strong feelings about using additives in their brew and they are proud to be using only ayahuasca and chacruna. Most will add small amounts of mapacho and other plants such as toé (*Brugmansia suaveolens*). Toé is a very controversial plant because it is considered to be used by brujos (sorcerers). Everybody agreed that it is a very powerful spirit and I was told that it is a very defensive spirit as well. Some shamans will use a small amount of it, small enough to not cause any visionary effect, precisely for this protective quality. This is what one shaman had to say on the subject of additives:

“We use a number of plants that a lot of other shamans consider to be plants that you don’t use. And then they often use plants that we won’t use. For instance we use catahua, a lot of shamans say they won’t use. They say it’s venomous, they say it’s a poison, they say it’s dark, they say it turns you into the dark side and all these things. We don’t believe it to be that way. We see it as a completely different spirit. Although they’ll use piñon rojo, and the spirit of piñon rojo for us by the nature of it being a red plant is basically based in red magic, or red arts, which are all negative and have to do with black magic, or becoming basically a witch doctor to do witchcraft on people”.

## **Ceremonies**

“I felt that I was doing something that had been done for thousands and thousands of years and I felt really connected with that, and I felt incredibly beautiful and I felt all the love and the energy of everyone in the room, and the beauty of the ceremony itself and I was just awed by how beautiful it was. I was in tears by how beautiful it was, and how healing it was, and how profound everyone’s experiences were”

The above quote by a consultant exemplifies what I meant by the importance of *communitas* in an ayahuasca ceremony. Contemporary ayahuasca ceremonies are rather informal and anyone can participate. Traditionally all male members of the community were allowed to partake as long as they wished to. Furst argues that the communal partaking of the visionary experience is a “democratization of the shamanic experience” (1993:222), even though the shaman is still perceived as the mediator between the world of humans and the world of the supernatural. Despite the fact that everyone is allowed to have access to this other, this does not undermine the authority of the shaman, who apparently has the skills to navigate and manipulate this world through their alliances with certain spirits.

In most of the ceremonies I observed a clear attempt to establish the intention of the participants at the beginning of the ceremony. Most of the times it was private, the shaman would encourage the participant to focus on their intention for the ceremony before they drank the brew. In one case the participants had already met with the shaman in private during the day and had discussed their intention. Usually shamans would emphasize the importance of intention and would encourage participants to formulate one, even if it were something vague such as “straightening their energy”. In some cases there was a public sharing of the intention with the group before the ceremony started. This way everyone’s intention crystallized and solidified by being shared aloud with the group. One shaman asked people to share how they felt at the moment before the ceremony starts.

Some shamans liked to give a speech before the ceremony to set the tone for

the night, but most just gave last minute advice to participants. Many people will wear white during the ceremonies and it is recommended by some shamans as they can see the people in the dark more easily in case they need to assist them. One shaman said that this way he can see inside the patients' bodies. When I asked participants about why they wore white they said that it was because this way they would stay pure. In any case wearing special attire in rituals is very common cross-culturally and demarcates this "time outside of time".

In most cases there was also an attempt to integrate or interpret the experience after the ceremony. Sometimes this was done right after the ceremony, when people would take turns around the circle and share in a few words what the experience was like for them or what they learned that night. Most of the time, this was done in the morning in informal circles where participants would share their visions and insights in the presence of the shaman or an apprentice. In some cases the shaman would interpret the visions and even share any visions or insights that they had the night before.

I will describe some of these rituals below, focusing on the beginning and the closing of the ceremony, to illustrate the variety of approaches to the ayahuasca ritual in the context of shamanic tourism. However, these are not meant to be representative, since the variety of styles and approaches is enormous. They are meant to give a taste of the small slice of this phenomenon that I had the chance to observe.



### **Ritual 1**

In this case the people participating knew each other and they came to Iquitos as a group. The trip was organized by one of them from the United States.

First the staff prepared the space for the ceremony by placing the tables (the ceremony was to be held in the lodge's dining room) around the room. People started to come wearing white clothes. The shaman burned palo santo and herbs and cleansed the space and made sure that everyone knew where the bathroom was. People started to take place on the cushions on the floor that were organized in the shape of an L. They had to be comfortable for six hours. The shaman sat on the opposite side of the L shape. She had three bottles of ayahuasca in front of her and some small bottles of essential oils and a small plate with pieces of ginger. She also had two glasses in which she was going to serve ayahuasca. The leader of the group sat next to her to translate and afterwards took her place with the others.

The shaman first asked everyone to share how they felt at the moment. They all said how blessed and grateful they were to be there. Two people were taking ayahuasca for the first time and the group welcomed them. Some mentioned that they had been through a lot lately. Some shared how much they loved the people in the group. Someone cried at the end of his speech. A man said he wants to figure out some stuff about his relationship with his partner, why they are drifting apart and how he can prevent this. Someone else mentioned serendipity, that the events that brought him

there were not random. Some people said they felt they were supposed to be there—they were meant to be there—or that it felt right. Someone commented on how courageous his friend was to join him on this series of ceremonies. They were all happy to be there, they said that the place was beautiful. They were also happy to be near nature. Some said that they had doubts during the day about taking ayahuasca, but not anymore.

Then the shaman gave a short speech. First, she welcomed everyone. She said that this ceremony is a celebration; a way to find ourselves because life often does not let us, since our culture and our environment do not encourage it. She said that the ceremony was about “vibrating” positively. She continued: “Because we become conscious that when we vibrate negatively for a long time we can harm ourselves, or become uncomfortable with ourselves. We can even make ourselves sick. Therefore by vibrating positively we help ourselves to transform the negative energy to positive. We are going to celebrate vibrating in a positive way. And our fears, we all have fears, learned fears, which are natural. Our fear is energy, which can be transformed into courage. We should breathe deeply and try not to fight the fear, but integrate it. We will invoke nature in general, the natural phenomena, the plants, the butterflies, the frogs that are here and sing for us, the crickets as well. At some moments we will be silent and let them sing for us”.

Then she made them aware of where the bathroom was and encouraged them to maintain their space during the ceremony and try not to bother their neighbors. If

someone had a difficult moment they should try not to touch them but try to support them only through energy. She advised everyone to follow the songs and not “stray too far” because “they maintain us”. She said not to forget to breathe deeply and try to keep calm. She stressed that if someone could not go to the bathroom they should say ‘baño’ and someone would help them. She repeated that the ceremony was a celebration of healing; “we heal ourselves with kindness. We are connected through song, you don’t need to know exactly what I’m saying; you can just follow along. I invite you to breathe deeply and open your heart to the medicine, leave the resistance, because we know that when we resist something, it persists. We are going to relax a little bit”. She added that they could sing along with her as long as they are in harmony with the song. In the end they would have the chance to sing and dance<sup>44</sup>. The leader of the group said that it would be great if each of them took their buckets with them and emptied them when they went to the bathroom. In the end of the speech the shaman explained a bit about ayahuasca for the two new people in the group. She talked about the two plants and she said that it means “death that lives” (muerte que vive), “because we have to die in order to live”.

After the speech, the shaman shook the ayahuasca bottles and started serving it to the group. She mixed from all three bottles in every glass. Later in the ceremony she offered participants a second cup and almost half of them took it. After drinking, some of them rubbed essential oils on their face and hands and they ate a piece of ginger to help with

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<sup>44</sup> This is unusual; in fact this was the only shaman that encouraged this at the end of the ceremony.

the bad taste and nausea.

She waited a while before she started singing; she first whistled. She did not use a Schacapa but used other instruments—panpipes, rattles and a drum—toward the end of the ceremony. During the ritual she took care of everyone, for example she gave them toilet paper when they vomited. Sometimes she stood up and sang in front of someone. Toward the end some people stood up and danced. In the end she asked if someone wanted to sing. Someone sang a blues song. Then someone else, who had previously participated in Native American ceremonies, sang a native American song. Someone else sang a song in English and then someone else sang a funny song that sounded like ‘I lost it, I didn’t know what it was, but I lost it’. Everyone laughed. Then the shaman asked them again to share how they felt. Some thanked everyone for their beauty, dancing and singing. Someone said that she saw colors. Someone said how important ritual is and that we should incorporate it into our lives. This person had taken other hallucinogens but in this one he found that the ritual is as important as the medicine. He shared that he had a really profound experience. Some people also thanked the shaman. Someone reflected on the negative and positive parts of being a human being. Someone else also mentioned our weaknesses and imperfections. A young woman said it was magical for her. When she went to the bathroom she looked at the jungle and saw the fireflies and then the most beautiful woman. A couple of people said they were tired. After the ceremony, most people went to sleep but some people stayed and talked in small groups. Many people also said that the medicine was really gentle that night and

they were grateful for that.

At the beginning of one of the following ceremonies the shaman asked the participants to share their intention. Here are some of the things that were said: “being by this huge river helps me to keep in mind my intention in coming here, which is the flow of life, the river, rather than go off on all these tributaries”, “continue the work from the previous ceremonies, which was healing and working with my energy”, “continue my healing and my rebirthing process”, “remember my heart”, “vibrate with love”.

After this the shaman gave a speech, which was very touching for everyone in the group. In fact, everyone I talked to on the following day felt that the speech was addressing them specifically. She said that we have a hard time dealing with negative things from our life; we should not fight these things but embrace them. For example if we have had bad childhoods, just like she had herself. All this is part of life and we cannot get rid of it—rather we need to transform it to something positive. It is energy and it cannot disappear, only transform to something else. She also said that we all have a shaman inside and we can heal ourselves. We can also inspire other people and help them too. She told the story of one of her trips to NY. She was with the leader of this group and a different group and they were doing some painting activities. She never thought that she could paint in her life and she wanted to just copy something and color it. But the group leader told her that she could do it and encouraged her to paint something and ended up painting a nice butterfly. She said that this is key, believing in oneself and inspiring other people.

At the end of the ceremony people shared how they felt. Many people said it was the best ceremony ever. They said it was different from others. They also expressed gratitude that they were there with each other. Someone said he learned a lot about himself, the others and the relationships between them. A man said that he saw a snake that went to everyone and then was lying in the middle of the room next to mud and water. He thought that the snake was thinking that this was where it wanted to be. Someone said that we are all beautiful. Someone said that it was a pleasure to be there with everyone. Someone apologized if he was annoying people during the ceremony because he had an intense night. He thanked another participant for holding his wings. He said he flew for the first time and it was not what he expected but it was great. He thanked another participant for her groundedness and added that he thought he was home. After the ceremony people ate fruit and talked in small groups.

Before the last ceremony in the same retreat the shaman gave a longer speech, in which she brought many of the same ideas together, weaving them with some of the events that had transpired during their stay at the lodge. People had started feeling tired and had demystified any romantic notions they had of the jungle. In this speech she is commenting on colonialism, connecting today's impoverishment of the area to the rubber boom era, and the loss of indigenous knowledge and the traditional way of life. She then talks about the ways that people can change the world by first transforming themselves. She closes with the message

that what people are seeking is inside them and that is what ayahuasca reminds them; to go back to the Self and discover their inner power and beauty.

She started with asking everyone if they were rested: “if you are too tired it’s better to be in bed. It’s important to rest not only our body but all of us”. When everybody said they were rested she said “We are prepared and rested to celebrate. We are going to express in two to three words how we are feeling now”. Some of the things that people said were: “very grateful, very deep”, “very grateful, a little sad that it’s our last ceremony, really happy to have gotten to know all of you”, “I feel the same way I felt on the first ceremony, completely open, no expectations”, “unsettled”, “transparent”, “unsettled, nervous, not knowing why, a little bit sick, also feel good, and sad”, “much more calm”, “slightly uneasy, grateful and open”, “a little nervous, not knowing what to expect”, “nervous, grateful and sad”.

The shaman then continued, “let’s open our heart to the experience. We are going to ingest once again the purga, mother ayahuasca, or “death that lives”. When we drink, we keep changing, we leave our past behind, the past becomes less important than our present, we live in the present. Our emotions emerge; sadness, happiness, hatred, frustration etc. Also our environment influences us, for example when it does not let us rest properly. ... To have health we have to have a healthy environment. When we don’t rest very well, we don’t feel as comfortable, we feel a little anxious. For all the inconveniences that we might have at the moment, we also have the conviction in us, the faith, that in the midst of all the interferences we can rest. Definitely sometimes our

lives are challenging. Especially here, we have had in the past our tribes of which there are almost no traces; we are forgetting our way of life, a healthy way to live. We see in the tribes young people who don't have teeth, which means that the health is not very good. Also, we are forgetting how to use the plants, because we had a very difficult period with the exploitation of the rubber. We have all this surrounding us, some of us who might be more sensitive might be able to feel all this in the environment, because it's the energy. But our purpose is to heal ourselves inside, change our interior world. We are doing a lot if we start working on our own interior world. This way we can inspire other people to do the same. We speak of healing ourselves deeply and one day little by little to share. So we can start thinking of how to change the world around us, what to do. A good way is to begin within ourselves. Also, if we want to help our world, let's not make chaos where there is chaos. So, let's sustain ourselves with our faith that we are light, we are love and despite the difficult moments and negative experiences, we can overcome them. With forgiveness—it's powerful when we forgive. Also acceptance—integrating everything, without separating things. When we accept and assimilate we can move on. It's important in our practices, our celebrations, our ceremonies, that we vibrate in a positive way that is beneficial for us. It's more important to have quality rather than quantity of life; if we have this quality of life, which is being positive. It's easy to be negative, but it's not healthy for us. We help ourselves when our feelings and thoughts are in accordance to our needs as living beings. In the twelve years of practice I've had, I learned that nothing and nobody in our universe can do nothing for ourselves if we don't allow it and we don't have that force of will. The plants help us,



but there are no miracles if we don't do our part and have will in our lives. Many times we have visions, the plants amplify what is inside us, but sometimes we don't accept the negative things that are inside us. We look at ourselves but don't see ourselves. It's easy to look at others instead of ourselves. Let's go deeply in our own universe and accept our negative things and transform them. As it helps us see them amplified we can recognize them and cultivate ourselves in a positive way. Cultivate our positivity, because when we vibrate more negatively we start feeling sick, pains etc. I have met many people who come with all the pains in the world, and in reality their pain is emotional. It's an emotional pain when we don't forgive, when we hate. Thus, our celebration is a reflection on ourselves, a reflection that sometimes might seem silly, or something we can't accept. But by accepting ourselves deeply, as we are, we are also beautiful; we should not forget that. We should have faith and confidence that we are privileged. Because animals are not privileged. In our culture animals are not important; the plants neither. Despite the privileges that we have, we give ourselves the luxury of being unhappy. Thus, we should give thanks to nature and honor our lives and feel our privilege. Our life is a great gift if that's the way we see it—it's how we perceive it. We have a very powerful mind that can destroy, as well as create and cultivate. ....

Some people who come to the ceremonies, say, 'ah how beautiful you are! You are an angel!' But it's what it's inside us that we see reflected on other people. Thus, especially in this celebration, as the medicine makes us very sensitive, we are together deeply and see ourselves. We have to remember that we are a reflection. ... Sometimes I feel ugly and then I project it on others and I start seeing everyone else as ugly. We should be

conscious of this. When this happens I tell myself to wait and analyze what I am feeling and thinking. I find that it is myself [that I see]. Thus, we cleanse our temple with love and heal ourselves. The lesson is that the plants remain in our hearts and help us to remember in our lives. Let's remember the lessons and practice in our lives. Our ceremonies last a few hours but after that our life continues. It continues and it is important to forgive ourselves and the others around us. Don't forget to smile, despite the difficulties, because it has been demonstrated that smiling is healing. When we laugh or sing our muscles relax. And when we are tense or angry our system is paralyzed. The blood does not circulate well. But when we smile and sing like the birds, it relaxes us.

...

A man was looking for love and happiness everywhere. He couldn't find it; he traveled to the Himalayas, looking for that powerful force that would give him happiness. He couldn't find it because it was inside him. This power is inside us and this is what the plants remind us. So we begin with a smile".

## **Ritual 2**

This ritual is closer to what is traditional mestizo practice in the area. It was performed in the back room of the house of the shaman in the city of Iquitos.

Because of space limitations, the number of participants did not exceed five or six. In this context there was usually some distraction from noise made by the other members of the shaman's family, in the other rooms of the house, or noise from the street. The ritual was faithfully observed each time with very small variations. In

addition, there was a focus on individual healing or blessing for each participant.

There is more Christian symbolism in this ritual as opposed to a more universal spirituality approach.

The floor was lined with newspapers and cushions were lined around the room in front of the walls for the participants to sit on. In front of the shaman's chair were a few bottles: a big bottle of ayahuasca (in an Inca Cola bottle), a smaller bottle with water and camphor, a bottle of agua florida and another bottle with holy water. There was also a picture of Jesus with a cross next to it and the shaman wore a big black cross around his neck. On a newspaper next to the bottles, there was a bundle of the ruda plant. There were also four small mapacho cigarettes and a big one. He lit the big one first. There were also two stones; a small one and a bigger one. I did not see him use them during the ritual because it was dark but I did hear them clicking at some point.

He began by standing up and saying a quiet prayer facing all the directions in the room. He also looked up a lot and held his hands upward. After that he opened the bottle with the holy water and he spit some in all directions of the room. Then he poured some agua florida on his palm and put on his head and neck. He also blew inside his shirt and repeated this with the alcanfor (camphor). He also smelled it through each nostril. After the cleansing, he blew some smoke in the palm of his hand and he passed it over his head and neck. Then he opened the bottle of ayahuasca and blew into it just with his breath. He did that a few times and whistled an icaro for a while. Then he shook the bottle by putting his palm to the mouth of the bottle to stop it from spilling. Then he

started serving ayahuasca to everyone in a small yellow plastic cup. He called each person to come and sit in front of him and then he whistled into their cup. Then he gave it to them and they drank it after saying “salud”. Some of the participants put some of the brew on their forehead, their eyes and their face before drinking it. After each person drank and while they were still holding the empty cup the shaman said a short blessing. Then he told them that they could go back to their seats. After that they all first took the alcanfor bottle and they put some on their head and neck and then smelled it through each nostril. Then they put agua florida on their head and neck. One of the participants, who was more experienced, had his own bottle of alcanfor and agua florida and he passed them around for everyone to use. He also gave instructions on what to do with them. Smelling the alcanfor cleansed the nostrils and felt good after drinking the brew. A couple of people were blowing their nose a lot after drinking the brew. When his apprentice sat in front of the shaman and while he was saying the prayer, he kept his right hand on his heart. Then before he drank the ayahuasca he kept the cup on his heart for a while. Whenever he spoke to his teacher, he was very respectful and always said “que dios le bendiga” (may god bless you). The other people in the house made some noise outside the room several times and he shushed them. During this time everyone was sitting with their eyes closed. After he served a first time drinker, he told her not to be afraid and that she was going to be safe there. He also said that if anyone felt bad during the ceremony, they should say so and he would take the mareación away. The shaman drank last. He poured a small amount for himself and he drank it very slowly; in the end he exclaimed “rico” (tasty)! After he drank he went out

of the room and he blew smoke in the corridor for protection.

After a while they turned off the lights. It was almost 10:00 p.m.. He started singing really low and gently at first, closer to whistling. Then he sang some icaros. After a while he came to each participant and blew smoke on their heads and inside their shirts on their backs; he also touched their neck and back making a small cross with his fingers. He asked everyone individually if they were “mareados” (dizzy or high). Some people said yes but most of the other people said “a little”.

After this he started calling the participants one by one for their individual healings. He pointed to someone with the flashlight to call them and they sat in front of him. First he did a prayer and then an icaro for each person. Everyone sang along during this time. Sometimes the shaman’s voice was really deep and vibrating. He did this treatment to everybody and it took at least 15 minutes per person. The prayer started with “dios mio, dios mio, señor de los cielos, padre mio, padre santo; dios mio, dios mio, señor de los milagros, padre mio, padre santo”; then he called the virgin Mary and the virgin of Guadalupe, the Holy Trinity (santísima trinidad) and other saints and said “madre mia, madre santa” or “padre mio, padre santo” after each one of them. For example he called Santa Rosita and added “madre mia, madre santa”; the last saint he called was San Martin de Porres, who he addressed as “hermano Martinsito” and added “padre mio, padre santo” after that. Then he asked him to remove from the person’s body all their afflictions and their ailments (“Te pido, te ruego que limpies todo lo malo, que botes

todo lo que no vale, todas sus dolencias, todas sus aflicciones, todos sus malestares”).

Then he asked them to take care of the body of this person and heal it, get rid of all the negative things and tranquilize them. After the prayer he sang an icaro for each person.

In this case he sang the same icaro for each participant. While singing he tapped the top of people’s heads with the bundle of the ruda plant. After the song he blew smoke on the crown of the head, neck, inside the shirt (front and back) and finally in the hands and then told the person to close them. He also touched these parts with his hands (making a cross) and then with the plants. He also put some camphor in his mouth and he blew it on the person’s face. He blew on the people many times really loudly and he also sucked from the crown of their head making a loud sucking noise. Then he blew again. After that he shook gently the shoulders and head and pulled it up slightly—as if he was rearranging the person. In the end he blew smoke in the hands and he closed them. After he was done he would say to each one “esta servido” (“you are served”) and then he would tell them to return to their seat. He would also illuminate the way with the flashlight to help them. Sometimes in between he would say “Gloria a Dios” (glory to god).

He repeated this process with his apprentice in the end. After he did this to everyone he said another prayer and told us that we were “served”. The prayer was thanking god for being there that night and protecting us and taking care of us. He also asked that everyone goes home calm and happy. He said that several times until people started preparing to go. It was almost 2:00 when they lit the light again.

In one of the first ceremonies with this particular shaman I was surprised to discover that he sang the same icaro over and over again for each participant. Later when I asked why, I was told that this is what he does when there are beginners in the group. In fact in that ceremony, there was a person who drank ayahuasca for the first time. I was told that he sings a greater variety of icaros when people are more experienced. In fact, in subsequent ceremonies with different participants the shaman sang a different icaro for each participant.

### **Ritual 3**

This was a ceremony that was lead by the apprentice of the curandero in the previous ritual. This ceremony was also held in a house in Iquitos, in the bedroom of the shaman that was cleared of the furniture for this purpose. The shaman followed the ritual of his teacher pretty closely but had added some elements of his own as well.

In front of the shaman was a temporary mesa with the things necessary for the ceremony. They included the ayahuasca bottle, bottles of agua florida, a bottle of holy water and a bottle of alcanfor (camphor), also containing two camalonga seeds. He had these because he dieted this plant as an apprentice. They usually have two seeds, one male and one female. Their spirits are two doctors in white, a man and a woman. Next to the bottles was a picture of his teacher, who he says is always there for him, a flute, a maraca, a bell, some crystals, a number of mapacho cigarettes, a pipe and a schacapa

made of ruda.

Before he started the ceremony he told us that if during the ceremony we feel bad and need help to let him know, because that is what he was there for. He said we should not worry about others if they are having a hard time. We should concentrate on our own stuff and let him worry about it. Then he took a little book he had in front of him titled “Angel del Día” (angel of the day) and he explained to us what it was. We had to turn it around nine times and then open it in one random page and that would be our angel for the day. We all had to do this and read aloud what it said. He said that this was always accurate and what it said was more or less what someone needed to work on that night. After everyone did that he started blessing the room. He did it the same way his teacher did. He looked in all directions of the room, blew smoke and said a prayer.

Then he opened the bottle of ayahuasca and he blew in it, first without smoke and then with smoke from the big mapacho cigarette. He also whistled an icaro. He then shook the bottle by putting his hand at the mouth of the bottle. Then he blew smoke in the cup which was made of a carved fruit. Then he started calling each participant to sit in front of him. He said a prayer for every person before they drank and then gave them the cup. His prayer is very similar to his teacher’s but he has changed some of the saints and has added the elements of nature: the four directions, mountains, rivers, air, the guardians of the elements and the four doors. He also asked for healing for the specific person and a good journey, by saying their name. After drinking, everyone put camphor



and agua florida on themselves. One of the participants put it on different spots of his body, head, neck, behind his ears etc. The same person had in front of him an object that looked like a silver cone—similar to a tipi—and it was placed on a decorated piece of cloth. He wore a Shipibo embroidered shirt for the ceremony. Another participant had a huge white crystal in front of her and wore a purple cloth over her shoulders. The shaman wore a t-shirt with a picture of his teacher on it. On the back there is a picture of a group of people that had participated in a dieta with him—the ones that had the t-shirt made.

After he drank, the shaman cleansed himself, first with camphor, then with agua florida and then with smoke. After that he went to the bathroom and when he came back he turned off the lights. He started singing almost immediately. First whistling gently and then actually singing. First he sang a few of his icaros and then one of the long icaros of his teacher. One of the participants was having a hard time and vomited really violently for a long time. The shaman would repeat to him to throw away everything that is not useful (“bota todo lo que no vale”).

The shaman got up twice and came to each participant and blew smoke on them. He first blew smoke on the crown of the head and then on the back and the chest of the person. He also touched them with the ruda and then blew smoke in their hands. Ruda is used to absorb all the negative things from the body. Then he closed their hands and blew three times in them. He did it by putting the tips of the fingers against his mouth

and by blowing intensely between the hands. Then he asked the person if they were “mareados” (dizzy). Sometimes in between the Icaros he would play the flute and once he used a bell and a maraca. Later he told me that he added these elements to make the ceremony longer so that it does not end when people are still under ayahuasca influence. After a while he called each participant individually to sit in front of him. When he called them he did the same routine with his teacher, only the prayer was slightly different—mentioning the elements of nature—and the way he blew in the hands in the end. He also sang a different song for each one of the participants. He also whistled in some of the icaros. In some icaros in addition to calling the plants, he called the minerals and metals, such as gold and silver.

After the ceremony we sat in front of the shaman’s house and talked into the early hours of the morning. People shared their visions and exchanged stories. The mood was positive and light.

People who participated in ceremonies closer to the first example were very conscious of the importance of ritual to them. One consultant said that for him the knowledge he got from ayahuasca was not as important. What was important was the love and the support he was getting from the group. A perfect example of *communitas*, which was also reinforced by the fact that the group members got to know each other and spent time together in a retreat. The ritual was important in the other two settings as well but there was less group cohesion even though most of the

time at least some of the participants knew each other.

## **Discussion**

For some critics, Western interest in shamanism is nothing more than a narcissistic worship or pursuit of the Self. For example, Hamayon (2001) argues that while shamanism used to aim at collective benefit today among westerners it becomes centered on individual welfare, while spirits are themselves disappearing. This is not entirely accurate in the case of ayahuasca, since numerous consultants report contact and respect for spiritual beings and non-human persons in general. However it is true that while traditionally ayahuasca saturated all aspects of life, westerners have a different agenda when pursuing it. Even though from an outsider's perspective it might be perceived to be a selfish pursuit, from an emic perspective it is a personal project perceived to have larger implications for society. Healing of the self becomes a prerequisite of healing humanity; by transforming the self one contributes to the process of transforming society as a whole. Even though this is quoted to be an idea dominant in the New Age movement, people who turn to ayahuasca are weary of the New Age. Even though they share some of its basic assumptions, they are looking for a more "authentic" expression of these ideas in a more "traditional" setting, whatever that may be.

In any case, when we are looking at a context such as that of shamanic tourism, it is impossible to have a truly "authentic" or "traditional" model (if such a model ever existed); rather the resulting ideas are a hybrid between Western ideas of

the self, blended with ideas from Asian spirituality and Amazonian shamanism. It would also be unrealistic to try to draw a generalized model of the self among ayahuasca users, since they draw from many sources and diverse backgrounds, but through ethnographic examples I will show that there are some common themes regarding self transformation that were expressed among the practitioners and users that I worked with. I often had discussions with westerners in the field that viewed Peruvians for example as bounded by their culture and their individuality as limited. They felt fortunate to have the freedom of movement that Western culture gave them. Some might point out that it is ironic that despite asserting that, they were still seeking to find themselves by stepping outside of this culture that gives them this alleged freedom. But it is in fact because their culture gave them this freedom that they are able to step outside of it. This might minimize the subversive value of what they were doing.

In certain ayahuasca retreats there is a stronger emphasis on the personal transformation that the ayahuasca experience induces. To this effect a metanarrative that emphasizes personal transformation dominates all discourse. For example on the website of a well-known ayahuasca center, the word transformation and “transformational experiences” are mentioned often. Specifically it is said that “The ceremony is a time for spiritual transformation and spiritual growth, as the shaman practices the ancient medicine, guiding the ceremony through the use of icaros

(sacred medicine songs)<sup>45</sup>”. In another part of the website it is stated that “in the presence of the true healers, real life transformation takes place<sup>46</sup>”. During the retreats and workshops this idea is reinforced by the shamans and apprentices sharing their own journeys and transformation sharing how ayahuasca changed their life. Participants are in this way prepared psychologically and mentally for a powerful and transformative experience. The stories of former participants that made radical changes in their lives after returning home from an ayahuasca retreat are also shared. Some of the participants I talked to did come to the retreat with this intention and the expectation of radical transformation for themselves and their lives.

As already discussed, ceremonies provide the ideal setting for personal transformation, by providing the liminal space that in turn challenges basic cultural assumptions. This stems from the belief that cultural conditioning in the West teaches rationality, materialism, and disbelief in spiritual reality, something that hinders self-development. Many consultants report encountering their “higher” self and the destruction of their old ego, or lower self. This is a known concept from Siberian shamanism, where the novice shaman feels “that the spirits are destroying his old ego, dissecting or boiling it, after which he is reassembled as a new shaman” (Siikala 1993:211). Several consultants have reported similar death and rebirth experiences, which were interpreted as a spiritual regeneration for the self. Many people report that this process is more important than the visions induced by

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<sup>45</sup> Overview of an ayahuasca ceremony: <http://www.bluemorphotours.com/overview-of-an-ayahuasca-ceremony.html>

<sup>46</sup> Amazonian Shamanism: <http://www.bluemorphotours.com/amazonian-shamanism.html>

ayahuasca. One of the shamans said that sometimes it is better not to have visions because then one can concentrate on the work that has to be done, while if people have visions all the time then it is just fun and they do not do anything useful. In his view, sometimes one has to be in the darkness in order to do the psychological work.

Here are some of the things that participants said they learned through ayahuasca or ways that it has been valuable to them:

“It has changed my life completely. It is now a part of my life and will always remain so. Ayahuasca is not just a drug one takes, it is a part of one’s life, it is a lifestyle for me. Even though I only have partaken 10 times over the last 19 months, there are not many days that pass that I do not think about it or things connected with it at least once”.

“Giving me another viewpoint from which to see my circumstances I have a better understanding of myself and I have found my inner strength. I know now what I’m capable of. I used to have extremely high stress levels at work but after the ayahuasca experience I am more relaxed and take things as they come. I also realized that we have enough time for anything. I also had the courage to make a dream come true: to quit my job, sell my house and to take a year off to travel through South-America”.

“Ayahuasca is a teacher plant that takes you on a journey deep within yourself. It forces you to face your issues and with ayahuasca there are no half measures, it is all or nothing. Ayahuasca is a medicine that helps you to reconnect to your true self and in doing so, helps you to be all that you can be”.

“For me it is a method of examining my life and the direction I am heading, understanding motives I have that might not be fully understood and utilizing it to improve my life”.

“At this point Ayahuasca for me is a lens or peephole that allows me extraordinary consciousness in areas of experience that I am familiar with but usually not as conscious or capable of remembering on return to waking consciousness. One aspect of it for me is that it works as a kind of check on the ego”.

For the transformation of the self to occur, usually a personal paradigm shift

has to happen first. Many people in fact have reported that the most important thing they got out of the ayahuasca experience was a change in the way they saw themselves, life and their relationships to other people and most importantly, the way they see hallucinogens. A paradigm is defined as “the entire constellation of beliefs, values, techniques and so on shared by the members of a given community” (Kuhn 1970:175). Many of my interviewees felt that the Western mechanical and commercial paradigm has deprived modern man of a sense of spirituality that is a human need. They thought that the increasing interest in ayahuasca was part of a process that they described as a paradigm shift for Western culture. In addition, for most of the people interviewed, there has been a sort of personal paradigm shift. They talked about how ayahuasca helped them break “cultural programming” and create a new self. However, it was believed that as more and more people participate in ayahuasca ceremonies and change their paradigms they will create a critical mass that will eventually change the cultural paradigm as well.

Most subjects stressed the importance of the spiritual dimension of the self, an important concept discussed in the work of William James and Karl Jung. Similar ideas have been explored in contemporary psychology as well as I have previously discussed. Some of the experiences that consultants described to me were interpreted as tapping into what Jung referred to as the collective unconscious (Jung 1966), a part of the mind that contains the collective experiences of an individual’s ancestors. As many of the visions described tend to be metaphorical, some of the subjects felt that they were in the form of archetypes, “mental models that generate magico-

religious images and myths whose similarities relate to their collective nature” (Cunningham 1999:35). These archetypes for Jung contain themes and patterns of myth and ritual that are essential to a process he referred to as *individuation*, the process through which the individual can reach self-fulfillment. Many of my consultants described similar processes, even though they did not use the word *individuation*. Individuation is achieved by “resolving any contradictions in one’s sense of self, by preparing the individual to face situations in life and by bringing forth the possibilities latent in the collective unconscious” (Cunningham 1999:36).

In the ritual setting that I researched, many reported therapeutic experiences that resolved critical situations in their lives. They were able to “see” some of the people or situations that caused conflict and either successfully confront them or change the outcome. Many people shared that they had powerful insights about themselves and their relationships during ceremonies. One consultant said that in one of his first ceremonies he realized that power is not what he wants, and that it is better for him to “go with the flow”. He rejected power and ego, but was aware that “sometimes in life you forget that and go the other way”; however, in the ceremony he remembered this pretty quickly. He said that he learned that instead of pursuing power it is better to just be pure. A practitioner of yoga also said that yoga is like an ayahuasca ceremony; it is not about power or prestige but about being true to your heart. By being in your heart you realize we are all one—one heart. He added that through ayahuasca he came to understand yoga teachings that he had read in books.

A lot of the times the visions people have are not directly related to their life.



These include encounters with non-human persons of various forms. Contact with these entities is important in the learning process and since westerners lack the framework to interpret them, they are perceived differently by different people (from demons or aliens to helping spirits, to elements of the psyche). Usually these entities play a role in the delivery of knowledge, or the personal transformation. People report experiences of their bodies being rebuilt by entities—much like the way a machine would be repaired—or being helped by their protecting spirits. Some reported experiences of shape shifting into a plant or animal form, which enhanced the perception of the existence of intelligence in the plants and strengthened their relationship to other beings. While some participants interpreted these experiences using a Jungian perspective—interpreting them as metaphors for internal processes—more experienced participants, after just a handful of ceremonies, saw them as literal contact with spirits. Peters and Price-Williams (1980) argue that this is the basic difference between Western psychotherapy and shamanism—the latter sees spirits “as objective events” (1980:405). In the context of this study some of the shamans, (having received a Western education and adopting a Western approach), have the tendency to interpret patients’ visions just like a therapist would interpret dreams—exploring the possible messages that the subconscious might be sending.

On the other hand some of the Western shamans have adopted the mestizo shamanism model and interpret psychological processes using spirit discourse. For example one of the shamans said

“Everybody that has negative self critical voices, low self-esteem, all suffer from

the same spirits. And you heal them in the ayahuasca sense by expelling those spirits out and those spirits when they come into ceremony they will try to get into another person's head. And when you are healing them they will even start talking bad things about you. 'Your medicine doesn't work, you can't heal, what are you doing? This isn't going to work!' That's how they talk. And you grab them and you expel them. But depending on what's going on in ceremony, those can be in you, that you picked up somewhere throughout your life, transferred energy from some other person, or somebody who said that stuff to you or whatever, it's not difficult to figure out. And as they release they can go into somebody else. So the role of the master shaman in the ceremony is to expel them and to not let them go into the head of anybody else. So there is no transference of dark energy that is coming out of people's bodies they are purging in ceremony".

During the course of my study, I have seen that shamanic extractive techniques proved successful for numerous people. Generally, all experiences—especially negative ones—are seen as lessons or tests given by the “medicine”. Negative experiences can also be seen in the light of failure of the individual to overcome his or her fears, for example if the person is so paralyzed by their fear that they cannot confront it and transform it into something positive. Some have commented on the importance of being supported and guided through the experience by an experienced shaman. Experiences that otherwise could have been terrifying, such as shape shifting, or a fear of not being able to “return” from the experience, can be overcome and transformed positively with adequate support.

Dissolution of the boundaries of the self, or a feeling of connectedness to

“everyone and everything” was often quoted as a benefit from ayahuasca ceremonies. A communication or access to “otherness” seems to be at the core of the ayahuasca experience. This often takes the form of contact with other beings, which in the context of Amazonian shamanism are considered to be the spirits of the plants. These encounters are not always interpreted in a Jungian framework as psychological processes. One of the most meaningful experiences or insights that people have is that of connectedness to nature, which is perceived as a conscious being. Comparing ayahuasca to other hallucinogens a consultant said that with ayahuasca

“you learn what it is to be a plant. You commune with the plants, you feel the vegetable kingdom coursing through your consciousness. It's a vegetable experience, it's very much non-verbal. It's very much experiential. ... It seems to be very vine-like, it seems to be this snaky vine movement through your body and through your mind and through your soul and ... Most psychedelics make you think, think, think, think! So you run in circles. ... With ayahuasca it's more visual and more experiential, it's vegetable in quality and you feel attuned into the energies, it feels like you are more in tune with your relationship to the ecosystem. It's impossible to talk about because it is vegetable in quality, and it's not in your head. I can talk about acid, I can talk about mushrooms, those things make me think. Ayahuasca doesn't make me think. It makes me experience. Of course there are thoughts. But they seem to be drowned out by the overwhelming experience”.

Participants often said that this experience came with the realization that humans need to be kinder and more respectful to each other and everything around them. In the words of one of the participants, what she learned from ayahuasca was

“a confirmation of the intangible forces and beings that live around us and within us. That we are all connected, that we have to avoid damaging others and ourselves. Is a way of connecting your body to something beyond the tangible, through this connection, new insights about you and the world appear that can lead to internal healing or illuminations/awakenings”.

Another participant shared:

“It made me realize the depth to which these substances could take you. I always thought of psychedelics as a spiritual thing, in the sense that they open you up and make you more sensitive etc., but ayahuasca seemed to tune you into... I started to wonder about there being an intelligence in these substances. I started to feel like there were spirits involved, there were intelligences, the plants themselves had consciousness; it’s the impression that is conveyed, and I still feel that way”.

Many shared that they experienced dissolution of the “ego” which brought with it the collapse of the separateness from the social and natural world that characterizes the Western conception of the self. This might take the form of a realization that the self is embedded within a web of social relationships. Often they interpreted this in the framework of Buddhist beliefs about the self. However, it seems that their perception of Buddhism comes more from popular publications in transpersonal psychology, which have been criticized for not reflecting the actual teaching of Buddha, but rather are a Western interpretation of them influenced more by Jung. For example Owens (1975) sees Buddhism as a psychology of self-realization and Zen meditation as a way to diminish the ego and liberate the intuitive

mind. Others (Wilber 1983) also have advocated a merging of the ego or self with a universal consciousness or mind. In such literature one can find ideas such as the idea of dissolving the subject–object dualism and merging with the natural world (Suzuki 1980). However, Buddhism with the doctrine of no-self does not support these ideas (Morris 1994). It has been argued that Buddhism is actually an extreme form of individualism that actually stresses radical empiricism; since there is no soul the only guide one has is oneself, and the goal should be a “radical detachment from the world, a repudiation of everything that constitutes or attracts the empirical self” (Morris 1994:69).

These transformative experiences were quoted as sources of knowledge about the self. Most people would express the belief that knowledge acquired in ceremonies comes directly from plants and spirits or from one’s own subconscious with the help of plant spirits. Many people, having had more exposure to eastern religions such as Buddhism, are looking for human spiritual guides and teachers as well, and they expect shamans to fulfill the role of a guru. When they see that in reality not only are they not spiritual but tend to be promiscuous, consume too much alcohol or practice sorcery, they, as one consultant put it, “renounce human teachers”. Many consultants in fact say that they only trust the plants to teach them, since human teachers tend to abuse power. This misunderstanding comes from a limited knowledge of Amazonian shamanism, which was always involved in the political life of the group and involved conflict between shamans as well as sorcery.

However, what’s important here is that there is great emphasis on the value

of the self as a source of knowledge and insight—the self becomes the expert. One consultant said that for a long time he was lost and he did not know that the solution was inside him. He spent years looking for something, by traveling etc. but he could not get what he needed. Ayahuasca helped him see that what he was looking for was already inside him. This was a common theme across shamans—the value of knowledge already existing in a person. One shaman said that many people go from shaman to shaman looking for “who knows what”, when everything they are looking for is in them. She also said that she does not accept people who have strange motives to her ceremonies, but talks to them beforehand and if they are looking for healing she accepts them.

It has to be noted that, even though there are some cases of radical transformation in just one ceremony, most consultants stressed the fact that this transformation of the self does not happen overnight but is a rather long and arduous process. Everybody I interviewed was aware of its difficulties and they described it as “work”. This is why people will return to Peru as often as possible in order to resume where they left off. Some who have enough experience and cannot afford the trip will acquire the plants, prepare their own brew and hold ceremonies at home. These rituals are highly personalized; some will use recordings from ceremonies they have from Peru to accompany the experience, or other music that they will deem appropriate. A number of people have said that they follow a similar ritual protocol with other hallucinogens, such as mushrooms. However, most of my consultants were not comfortable drinking ayahuasca without the guidance of a shaman in a

ceremony.

I have shown in the previous pages the ways that ayahuasca rituals are conceptualized as a liminal, transformative experience that contributes to the transformation of the self by providing the space to experience *communitas* and reflect. This is not a ritual that reproduces social order; rather the ingestion of a powerful hallucinogen provides the ideal instrument of critique of mainstream culture by challenging basic cultural assumptions about oneself and the world. The individual is then returned to culture transformed and reportedly with profound insights on their lives and relationships to others and the natural world.

## Conclusions

I have looked at the phenomenon of shamanic tourism from the perspective that it is not an anomaly but rather is consistent both with Western history as well as the nature of shamanism. I have also placed shamanic tourism in historical context within discourses in the West about shamanism and hallucinogens and have shown that we are witnessing a shift in cultural discourse about drugs. This discourse sees plant hallucinogens as sacraments and seeks their use in a ritual context with specific intentions. Westerners' intentions center on self transformation with the intent to heal not only the individual but eventually Western culture (which is perceived as diseased). Liminality is key in this process; westerners are physically temporarily away from their culture and their social roles; metaphorically they intentionally step outside culture by ingesting a hallucinogen that challenges the very cultural categories that they take for granted. In this space they find *communitas*, healing, and consequently personal transformation.

I showed that healing in this context is perceived in very specific ways. Things that cause imbalance in the body need to be violently expelled or extracted and these things are perceived to stem from negative feelings. However, the reality of sorcery as an integral part of Amazonian shamanism is something that many westerners have to eventually come to terms with. Westerners have found several ways to deal with this ambivalence; one of them is perceiving sorcery as an anomaly rather than an inherent element of shamanism.

Even though some anthropologists of tourism might disagree with this, I



argue that it might make sense to frame shamanic tourism as a sort of pilgrimage.

These phenomena share the focus on healing and personal transformation. In contrast to recreational use of similar substances, in shamanic tourism the element of crisis (and liminality) is central and becomes the springboard for both healing and self transformation. I argue that ayahuasca is viewed by westerners as the healing force for bodily and mental disorders that stem from what is perceived as Western culture's spiritual impoverishment. In addition, for Western participants in ayahuasca ceremonies, this healing is part of a larger project for healing and transforming humanity.

This pursuit and reconstructing the self outside of Western culture is perceived as a rebellion against Western (consumerist) culture; however, I show that actually this sentiment is traced to modernity, and is consistent with romanticism and Western individualism. Even though it is often argued that the mainstream Western conception of the self is based on the mind-body dualism that was introduced by Descartes, I argue that there have been several challenges to this dualism within the Western tradition, thus it is not a novelty but very consistent with the Western tradition of improving and cultivating the self. One of the central elements of the transformation of the self is the idea of a transition to a more socio-centric self in connection and harmony with other beings. I argue that the contrast between the ego-centric Western self and the sociocentric non-Western self is simplistic and exaggerated.

However, misconceptions among westerners exist. For example Ayahuasca

shamanism is perceived as ancient and representing a time when people lived in harmony with nature and each other. This romantic approach to shamanism has not been there from the beginning. Even though there is evidence of ayahuasca used in ancient times it is unlikely that it was used in the same way that it is used today even by indigenous people. Gow (1992) has argued that ayahuasca shamanism with a focus on healing, is a result of colonialism and a response to the brutal history that I describe in the introduction. I argue that it is not only possible that colonialism has played an important role in the development of ayahuasca shamanism as we know it, but that tourism continues to do so. This is particularly important when dealing with the more ambivalent aspects of shamanism such as sorcery and the possibility of tourism increasing sorcery attacks between curanderos.

Without a doubt, ayahuasca has caused and will continue to cause controversy. In recent times, globalization currents have carried the interaction among culturally constructed ayahuasca experiences much farther than ever before. The question arises what the position of ayahuasca will be in this global environment, especially in light of its declaration as part of the national cultural heritage of Peru in 2008<sup>47</sup> by the Peruvian National Institute of Culture (Labate et al. 2009). The question cannot be answered by generic arguments about recreational drugs as commodities. It is true that other psychedelics have similar effects but ayahuasca is different in that it is not used recreationally because of the unpleasantness of the experience as well the distinct motivations of the users

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<sup>47</sup> See Appendix 5.

discussed in earlier chapters. These motivations are, from shamanic tourists' or therapeutic clients' viewpoints, more benign; but these people may unintentionally make shocking demands on local societies, set disruptive examples, or saddle hosts with unwanted responsibilities.

As I have shown, the way indigenous peoples and their knowledge is perceived in the context of shamanic tourism can be highly problematic and this is something that needs to become more conscious among westerners. Ayahuasca tourism has been criticized for marketing native spirituality and degrading Amazonian traditions. Others believe that it can help preserve indigenous cultures, especially in the context of ecotourism managed by indigenous people (Zografos 2005). The truth depends on the context and falls somewhere in between. None of the two is really true for Iquitos because we are dealing with mestizo shamans who might have apprenticed with Indians, have introduced Christian elements to shamanism and marketed ayahuasca to urban populations, before tourism was even in the picture. Shamanism has been a profession rather than an integral part of the community life for long before tourism came into the picture.

However, the effects of shamanic tourism cannot be ignored. One of the effects of Western interest in shamanism and the growth of shamanic tourism is a great increase in the number of shamans in the last years. This increase is observed in the city of Iquitos as well as surrounding communities. While a few years ago, there was little interest by young people to apprentice and become shamans, the possibility of a steady income provides great incentive. The problem is that most of

these shamans do not apprentice for a few years as it was customary, but start to practice only after a few months of apprenticeship. Most of the shamans in the area of Iquitos are mestizos, meaning of mixed descent, but they claim that they have apprenticed with an indigenous shaman, often far away, a fact that gives them more credibility. This abundance of shamans has also created competition between them for the limited number of tourists. While sorcery has been a part of traditional Amazonian shamanism as I have shown, some of my consultants were concerned that shamanic warfare has increased because of tourism. Thus, even though shamanic tourism might bring much needed revenue to a historically impoverished area, it might also increase conflict. Some curanderos gain prestige by working with tourists or traveling to the West to lead ceremonies and have achieved recognition in Western ayahuasca circles. These ceremonies have steep fees and sometimes have long waiting lists. The people who play the role of the mediator in these situations are very important and their role needs to be studied further.

Practices such as shamanic tourism and the New Age have been seen as a form of “cultural imperialism” putting indigenous spirituality in a position where it can be commodified and this has been widely criticized especially by Native Americans (see Churchill 1992, Castile 1996, Rose 1992). Indigenous knowledge is being “sold” to an audience outside the native communities. This is a very controversial issue and as Wallis (2003) points out neoshamans tend to take knowledge from indigenous people and not give something in return. Also in the case of Native Americans there is the issue of copying indigenous traditions without

obtaining permission first (Wallis 2003:203). Neoshamans are given the label of “fraud” and case have been recorded of Native Americans using intellectual property rights—an inherently Western concept—in order to assert their rights (see Brown 1997:166-7).

On the other hand, western consumers see no conflict in the appropriation of indigenous knowledge. They believe that it is universal and everyone has a right to it. This is a general tendency of the New Age movement that has been observed by several authors. Vitebsky for example notes that New Age in its cosmopolitanism, “moves away from cosmology by dissolving the realm of the religious” (1995:277). He also argues that while New Age adopts certain elements of indigenous knowledge such as shamanism, “its full implications are too challenging even for radicals to accommodate” (Vitebsky 1995:293). Shamanism, in this context, is not viewed as a way of life by all participants. Even though many of the people in the population I studied do show a remarkable engagement with Amazonian shamanism, for the majority the relationship is still superficial and transient. It is also true that when indigenous knowledge is appropriated, it takes on the fragmentary nature of our society (Vitebsky 1995:296). Global culture is seen as unable to capture the holistic nature of indigenous knowledge because there is a lack of context for belief and application. Vitebsky, among others, implies that this contributes to the marginalization of indigenous knowledge, something that should be taken seriously.

Another concern that critics raise is that of sustainability and over-exploitation of plants. Since the plants utilized in the ayahuasca brew are most of the

time easily cultivated I do not see serious cause for concern for the extinction of the plants. Plants and people have a symbiotic relationship and as long as there is interest in ayahuasca we can be sure that the plants will continue to be cultivated. I observed many shamans in the Iquitos area cultivating their own plants from cuttings.

However, I was not able to trace the origin of the ayahuasca sold on the market. This is certainly a worthy area for future research. In addition, the effects of shamanic tourism on the environment should also be explored. Even though in my experience, tourists usually stay within specified areas and routes, it has been argued that their presence can be disruptive to the forest. Such activities can hardly get close to causing the environmental damage that extractive activities do, however. In addition, this type of tourism might provide more incentive to preserve the jungle; however hard data would settle this argument once and for all.

Critics comment on the long history of exploitation of indigenous people and will even go as far as to label any form of commercialization and appropriation of indigenous knowledge for outsiders' use as "cultural imperialism" (Meyer and Royer 2001). It is clear that further research should be done in order to determine the effect of ayahuasca tourism on indigenous people as well as mestizo communities. Rachel Proctor's article on Shipibo curanderos cashing in on the tourism and New Age interest in ayahuasca experiences shows us a side of indigenous peoples that, at first glance, does not reflect Western ideas of "authenticity" in a "traditional" indigenous group. But it also begs the question if authenticity is not itself culturally constructed. My goal with this dissertation was to show that while westerners need to be aware of

the history of inequality, exploitation and poverty that plagues the relationship of the West to former colonies, what is now referred to as “third world”, on the other hand, we are in danger of throwing the baby out with the bathwater.

The question is no longer “if” indigenous knowledge is going to be shared with outsiders but how and under what terms. It seems that ayahuasca tourism has developed very differently in Peru than in other neighboring countries. For one, these activities in Peru involve largely mestizo populations and they have had a more commercial character even before the influx of tourism. The fact that the Amazon was for a long time at the bottom of national agendas has contributed in keeping indigenous people and their knowledge marginalized. Even though it is hard to pinpoint all the factors that have contributed to this, one glaring difference is the lack of an organization of curanderos that gives indigenous people a significant voice in the dialogue between westerners and indigenous knowledge. While I was there I was told that ASMEVEI (Asociación de Medicos Vegetalistas de Iquitos) was founded in 2001 with 32 members, but there has not been much activity by it since then (Jernigan 2003). Both Colombia and Ecuador have such organizations that have control over the discourse and make sure that the issues that are important to indigenous peoples are on the forefront. These organizations are UMIYAC<sup>48</sup> in Colombia and ASHIN (Asociación de Shamanes Indígenas Del Napo), which now counts members from all around Ecuador. A similar organization that would monitor shamanic tourism and look out for the best interests of both curanderos and tourists

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<sup>48</sup> <http://umiyac.blogspot.com/>

would be a large step in the right direction. Declaring ayahuasca part of Peru's cultural heritage might indicate a shift in national discourse about indigenous knowledge and indigenous people themselves.

Western interest in ayahuasca and the development of shamanic tourism has no doubt forever changed the landscape in locales like Iquitos. I have shown that even though the Western interest in ayahuasca for westerners is much more than a pretext for recreational drug use it can also be highly problematic, and can have some unsettling effects, such as increasing inequalities locally, and increase in sorcery and shamanic warfare, not to mention risks for the tourists themselves. While this study has not been comprehensive, I hope it has raised some very important questions for the future of shamanic tourism.



## APPENDIX 1: Maps and Photographs

### Map 1: Map of Peru

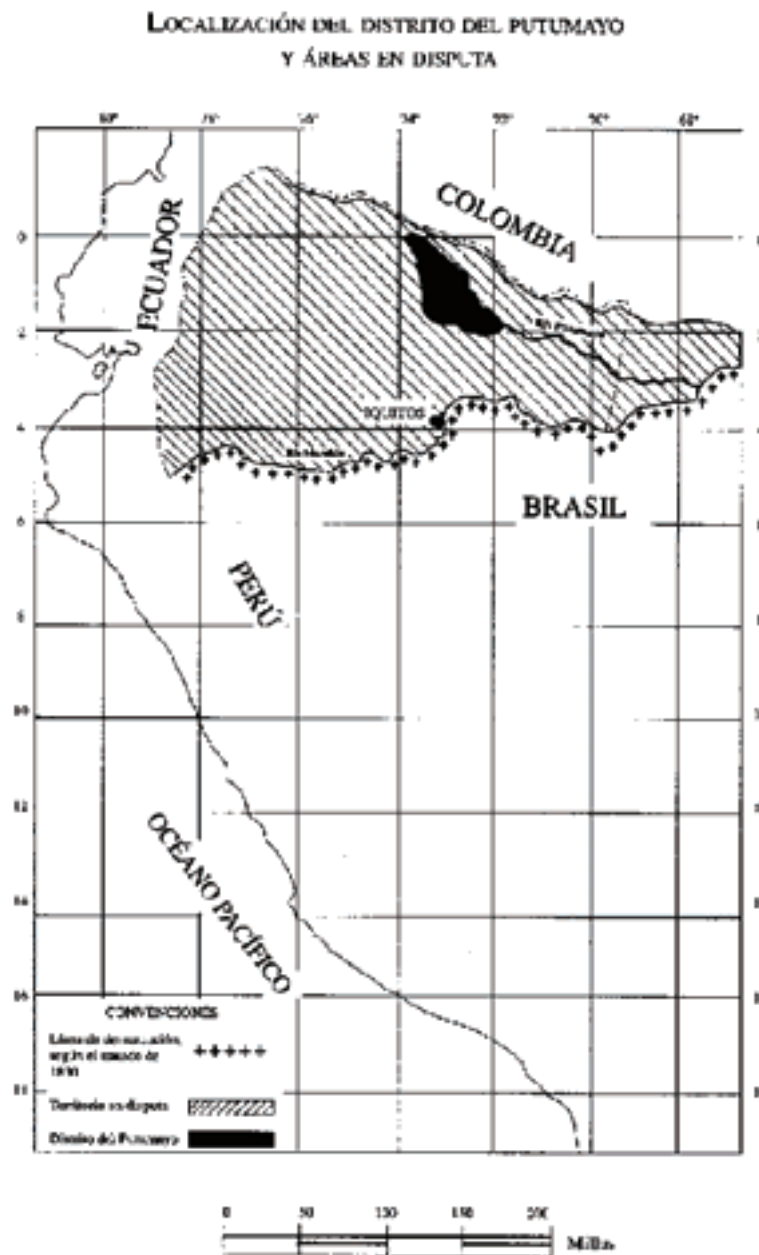
(source: [http://www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/americas/peru\\_pol91.jpg](http://www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/americas/peru_pol91.jpg))



**Map 2:** Satellite map of Iquitos, showing urban sprawl



**Map 3:** Rubber boom area, map from Casement 1912



Fuente: Casement. 1912b.

**Figure 1:** *Banisteriopsis caapi*  
(Schultes and Hofmann 1980:164)



**Figure 2:** *Psychotria viridis*  
(Schultes and Raffauf 1992:31)



**Photo 1:** Building from the rubber boom era decorated with tile



**Photo 2:** View from the Malecón



**Photo 3:** Building from the rubber boom era on a central street in Iquitos





**Photo 4:** Ayahuasca preparation; preparing the vine



**Photo 5:** Ayahuasca preparation; blessing the brew with mapacho



**Photo 6:** Ayahuasca preparation; checking the consistency of the brew



**Photo 7:** Ceremonial space before the ceremony at an ayahuasca retreat (the two doors in the back lead to the bathrooms)



**Photo 8:** Blessing (icarando) an individual serving of ayahuasca



**Photo 9:** A shaman with her schacapa



**Photo 10:** Shaman serving the brew



**Photo 11:** Blessing the bottle of onion and garlic used of protection, in a ceremony held at a local house.





**Photo 12:** Chatting before the ceremony at the shaman's house.



**Photo 13:** The shaman before the ceremony.





**Photo 15:** Chatting in the early morning hours after the ceremony in front of the shaman's house.



**Photo 16:** A mesa in the ceremonial space at an ayahuasca retreat.



**Photo 17:** The anthropologist working with a consultant.



## APPENDIX 2: Questionnaire

1. Age
2. Gender
3. Occupation
4. Religion
5. Have you previously used other hallucinogens? Which ones?
6. How did you first find out about ayahuasca (if it was through reading, what did you read?)?
7. What exactly was it about ayahuasca that attracted you?
8. How many times have you taken ayahuasca?
9. Where, in what context and with which shaman (s)?
10. How did you choose the specific shaman (s)?
11. Is there a shaman that you prefer and why?
12. Do you ever drink ayahuasca alone (without the supervision of a shaman) and if yes what ritual or procedure do you follow?
13. Did you take ayahuasca for a specific reason –what was your motivation or question (healing, spiritual etc.)?
14. How did you prepare for it (diet etc.)? (be specific!)
15. Describe some of your experiences as well as you can (visions, feelings, sensations etc). Please share any thoughts you might have on what they mean to you.
16. What in your opinion is the most important aspect of the ayahuasca experience (visions, ritual etc)?
17. Did ayahuasca help you in your life? How?
18. What would you say that you have learned from the experience?
19. Did ayahuasca help you with any medical problems you had? (if yes explain)
20. Have you combined ayahuasca with other spiritual practices (meditation etc.) and what results have you had?
21. How would you compare ayahuasca to your experiences with other hallucinogens?
22. Will you do it again? Why or why not?
23. In a few words – what does ayahuasca mean to you?

### APPENDIX 3: Glossary of common terms

ASCs: altered states of consciousness
Agua Florida: cologne used in ceremonies for protection
Aguardiente: strong liquor made of sugarcane
Alcanfor: camphor
Apu: father of nature
Ayahuasca: hallucinogenic potion made of two plants native to the Amazon, the liana <i>Banisteriopsis caapi</i> and <i>Psychotria viridis</i> . The name ayahuasca is also the vernacular name of the vine itself.
Ayahuasquero: a healer specializing in leading ceremonies with ayahuasca
Banco: the highest level of shaman
Brujeria: witchcraft, sorcery
Brujo: sorcerer
Camalonguero: an expert in the use of camalonga
Schacapa: a bundle of leaves of the <i>Pariana spp.</i> palm that is used in ceremony
Chacruna: the vernacular name of <i>Psychotria viridis</i> , the DMT containing plant in the ayahuasca mixture
Chagropanga: the plant <i>Diplopterys cabrerana</i> , which is often used instead of chacruna in the ayahuasca brew
Chonta: species of palm whose trunk is covered in thorns, also means dart
Chontero: specialist in harming, shaman who works with darts
Curanderismo: traditional folk healing practice
Curandero: traditional or folk healer
Dieta: the diet that needs to be followed by someone when drinking ayahuasca (no salt, sugar, sex, alcohol, pork) - also a special plant diet to acquire knowledge through the spirits of the plants
Dietero: A person who is on a special diet with plants and follows the restrictions



Genio: spirit of a plant or other object such as a stone
Huarmi Icaros: icaros to attract a woman
Icaro: The songs that shamans sing during the ceremony and are believed to have special powers. They are said to be taught to them by the plants themselves. The apprentice first learns the maestro's icaros but later on they receive their own from the plants and compose their own.
Iñono: another name for ayahuasca
Maloca: palm thatched house on stilts built in the jungle
Mapacho: strong tobacco from the <i>Nicotiana rustica</i> plant
Mareación: the state of being under the influence of ayahuasca. Dizziness
Mariri: it is used wither to refer to the songs, but also to the phlegm that a shaman gives to the student.
Mesa: the ceremonial circle, altar
Mestizo: of mixed European and indigenous descent, who only speaks Spanish
Pachamama: mother earth in Quechua
Palero: healer that specializes in healing with tree barks
Pederal: stone used in the ceremony to absorb illness from the patient's body
Perfumero: specialist in healing with perfumes
Pusangero: a specialist in love magic
Sachamama: boa of the earth
Sangama: great witch (gran brujo)
Shaman: word that is used to connote a variety of spiritual practitioners and healers, originally came from the Tungus people
Shapingo: guardian of the forest
Shitanero: a specialist in harming, killing people
Tabaquero: a specialist in healing with tobacco
Tambo: a simple hut in the jungle commonly used for dieting
Vegetalista: specialist in plant medicine

Virote: magical darts
Yachay: phlegm stored in the body of the shaman
Yagé: another name for ayahuasca (in Colombia)
Yacumama: boa of the water

## APPENDIX 4: List of plants

(As cited in McKenna, D.J.; L. E. Luna, and G. H. N. Towers 1995, Castner, J.L., Timme, S.L., and Duke, J.A. 1998, Duke, J.A., and Vasquez, R. 1994, Duke, J.A. 2009, Schultes and Raffauf 1990, López Vinatea 2000)

<b>Vernacular Name</b>	<b>Scientific name</b>
Ajo Sacha	<i>Mansoa alliacea</i>
Ayahuma	<i>Couroupita guiaensis</i>
Ayahuasca	<i>Banisteriopsis caapi</i>
Bobinsana	<i>Calliandra angustifolia</i>
Capirona negro	<i>Calycophyllum spruceanum</i> <b>or</b> <i>Capirona decorticans</i> (López Vinatea 2000)
Catahua	<i>Hura crepitans</i>
Chacruna	<i>Psychotria viridis</i>
Chagropanga, Chaliponga	<i>Diplopterys cabrerana</i>
Chiricaspi	<i>Brunfelsia chiricaspi</i>
Chiricsanango, Chuchuhuasha	<i>Brunfelsia chiricsanango</i>
Chullachaquicaspi	<i>Tovomita sp.</i>
Cumaceba	<i>Swartzia polyphylla</i>
Huacapú	<i>Vouacapoua americana</i>
Huacapurana	<i>Campsiandra angustifolia</i>
Huayracaspi	<i>Cadrelinga catanaeformis</i>
Lupuna, Lupuna blanca	<i>Ceiba pentandra</i>
Mapacho	<i>Nicotiana rustica</i>

Oje	<i>Ficus insipida</i>
Piñon rojo, piñon negro, piñon colorado	<i>Jatropha gossypifolia</i>
Palo Santo	<i>Screrolobium setiferum</i>
Piri piri	<i>Cyperus spp.</i>
Remocaspi	<i>Pithecellobium laetum</i>
Ruda	<i>Ruta graveolens</i>
Sanango	<i>Tabaerne-montana sonanho</i>
Schacapa	<i>Pariana spp.</i>
Tamimuri	<i>Brosimum acutifolium</i>
Toé, floripondio	<i>Brugmansia suaveolens</i>
Uchusanango	<i>Tabernae-Montana spp.</i>

## **APPENDIX 5: Designation as Cultural Patrimony of the Nation Extended to the Knowledge and Traditional Uses of Ayahuasca as Practiced by Native Amazon Communities<sup>49</sup>**

National directorial resolution Number 836/INC

Lima, June 24 2008-07-14

Having read Report No. 056-2008-DRECP/INC dated May 29, 2008, prepared by the Directorate of Registration and Study of Contemporary Culture in Peru:

CONSIDERING:

That Article 21 of the Political Constitution of Peru indicates that it is the function of the State to protect the Cultural Patrimony of the Nation.

That part 1, Article 2 of the Convention for the Preservation of Non- material Cultural Patrimony of the UNESCO, establishes that "it is understood that ?Cultural Patrimony is defined as the uses, representations, expressions, knowledge and techniques-together with instruments, objects, artifacts, and cultural spaces that are inherent to them---that the communities, groups, and in some cases individuals, recognize as an integral part of their cultural patrimony?. This non-material cultural patrimony, which is transmitted from generation to generation, is constantly re-created by communities and groups, by means of their location, their interaction with nature and their history, inducing a feeling of identity and continuity and therefore contributing to promote respect toward cultural diversity and human creativity".

That Article VII of the Preliminary Title to Law NO. 28296

General Law on Cultural Patrimony of the Nation disposes that the National Institute of Culture is charged to register, declare and protect the Cultural Patrimony of the Nation within the confines of its responsibility;

That part 2) of Article 1 of Title 1 of the above mentioned Law establishes that part of the Cultural Patrimony of the Nation consists of the creations of a cultural community, based upon traditions, to be expressed by individuals unilaterally or in groups, and that consensually respond to community expectations, as an expression of cultural and social identity, in addition to the values transmitted orally, such as

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<sup>49</sup> Retrieved from <http://encod.org/info/Official-Recognition-of-Ayahuasca.html>

autochthonous languages, tongues and dialects, traditional knowledge and wisdom, be it artistic, gastronomic, medicinal, technologic, folkloric or religious, the collective knowledge of peoples, and other expressions or cultural manifestations, which jointly comprise our cultural diversity;

That National Directorial Resolution No. 1207/INC dated November 10, 2004, approved Directive No. 002-2004-INC "Recognition and declarations of active cultural manifestations as Cultural Patrimony of the Nation";

That it behooves the National Institute of Culture, in order to carry out its function as assigned by law, with the active participation of the community, to conduct a permanent identification of such traditional manifestations of the country that should be declared as Cultural Patrimony of the Nation;

That by means of the proper document, the Directorate of Study and Registration of Culture in Contemporary Peru requests a declaration as Cultural Patrimony of the Nation the knowledge and traditional uses associated with Ayahuasca, and practiced by native Amazon communities, according to the Report prepared by Dona Rosa A. Giove Nakazawa, of the Takiwasi Center-Tarapoto and submitted by the Regional Office of Economic Development of the Regional Government of San Martin to the Regional Directorate of Culture of San Martin;

That the Ayahuasca plant-*Banisteriopsis caapi*-is a vegetable species which garners an extraordinary cultural history, by virtue of its psychotropic properties, used in a beverage associated with a plant known as *Chacruna-Psychotria viridis*;

That such plant is known by the indigenous Amazon world as a wisdom plant or plant teacher, showings initiates the very fundamentals of the world and its components. Consumption of it constitutes the gateway to the spiritual world and its secrets, which is why traditional Amazon medicine has been structured around the Ayahuasca ritual at some point in their lives, indispensable to those who assume the function of privileged carriers of these cultures, be they those charged with communication with the spiritual world, or those who express it artistically.

That the effects produced by ayahuasca, extensively studied because of their complexity, are different from those produced by hallucinogens. A part of this difference consists in the ritual that accompanies its consumption, leading to diverse effects, but always within the confines of a culturally determined boundary, with religious, therapeutic and culturally affirmative purposes.

That available information sustains the fact that the practice of ritual ayahuasca sessions constitutes one of the basic pillars of the identity of the Amazon peoples, and that the ancestral use in traditional rituals, warranting cultural continuity, is

closely connected with the therapeutic attributes of the plant;

That what is sought is the protection of traditional use and sacred character of the ayahuasca ritual, differentiating it from Western uses out of context, consumerist, and with commercial objectives;

That the Manager, the Director of Registration and Study of Culture in Contemporary Peru, and the Director of the Office of Legal Affairs, being cognizant of the above information;

In conformity with the dispositions of Law No. 28296, "General Law of the Cultural Patrimony of the Nation" and Supreme Decree No. 017-2003- ED, which approves the By-Laws of the Organization and Operation of the National Institute of Culture.

IT IS RESOLVED:

Sole Article.-

To declare as CULTURAL PATRIMONY OF THE NATION, the knowledge and traditional uses of Ayahuasca practiced by the native Amazon communities, as a warranty of cultural continuity.

Be it registered, communicated, and published.

JAVIER UGAZ VILLACORTA

Manager of the National Directorate National Institute of Culture

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