

Female Ayahuasca Healers Among the Shipibo-Konibo (Ucayali, Peru) in the Context of Spiritual Tourism (*)

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A casual encounter with two female British tourists in a cafe in Pucallpa, Peru, in the year 2007 sparked an animated conversation about ayahuasca and shamanism. In the course of this conversation, both women explained that they came to Peru to take ayahuasca in order to learn more about the plant and themselves, and to heal from various ailments, among them stress and a chronic back pain. Having already taken ayahuasca² before with different shamans, one of them stated what I would frequently hear from tourists during my four months of fieldwork: “There are so many westernized shamans in this region. They are [...] not authentic; they have given up their traditions. They’re only in it for the money.” The women stressed that they did not care for these shamans, and that they would never drink ayahuasca with them. Following a trial and error method, they had recently found a female shaman that met their criteria for authenticity and therefore, their approval: This elderly woman lived in humble conditions in a slightly more secluded community “off the beaten track,” spoke Spanish with certain difficulty, dressed in the traditional Shipibo clothing of *chitonti* and *blusa*, offered her healing services for a comparably low price, and had not worked with foreigners up to that point. My British counterparts proved to be very satisfied with their shaman hostess. One of them concluded: “I wouldn’t drink with men anymore. Between women, there is just a better energy, which helps you in the visions.”

The aspect of authenticity as a key component in the average visitor’s search for the right shaman, setting, or community, has been aptly described in a number of publications (Dobkin de Rios 1994, Wallis 2003, Owen 2006). A phrase I encountered in Wallis (2003:64) seems to fit exactly what I found to be the expectations of many tourists I talked with during my field research: “a ‘shaman-ness’ is sought after, but not the contemporary shamanisms which are often, to some extent, acculturated or ‘tainted’

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² Both the name of a plant (*Banisteriopsis caapi*) and the name for a brew used in shamanic sessions.

with modernism.” The ideal shaman is, thus, outwardly and inwardly traditional, conservatory.

Is there something like a traditional female ayahuasca healer? Anthropologists and some Shipibo as well, will prick up their ears at this point. There is a perceived discrepancy when it comes to traditional shamanism and female ayahuasca healers.

Female shamans certainly fill a niche in commercial shamanism and spiritual tourism. Especially for lone women travelers, they provide a safe alternative to some of their male colleagues. Furthermore, Shipibo women have a manifest visual advantage when it comes to traditional appearances: with their skirts brightly sewn with typical Shipibo designs, colorful traditional blouses, and heavy pearl belts, they look more authentic to the visitors than their male counterparts who often dress in shirts or t-shirts and modern-style pants. In many cases women also have a captivating singing voice needed for intoning the *ikaros* they find during their shamanic sessions. However, there arises the question of the “authenticity” of the women shamans when one considers that according to anthropological literature (Roe 1982, Tessmann 1928, Caruso 2005) and many Shipibo themselves, shamanism was traditionally restricted to men. Are woman shamans thus an invention of modern times, responding to the demands of tourism?

This essay tries to portray the current situation of female Shipibo shamanism in urban areas in two communities³ near Pucallpa (district capital of the department of Ucayali, Peru), as well as the self- and external perception of female healers among the Shipibo. The information used in this essay was gathered between February and July of 2007, and served as basis for my Master’s thesis⁴. During that time frame I worked with six women and four men who called themselves *onaya*, shamanic healers. Finding female *onaya* was not difficult. Colpron (2005:101) estimates that among Shipibo ayahuasca healers, about ten percent are women, while an official from the regional tourism administration (DIRCETUR) in 2007 put the numbers at two to five percent. In San Francisco, a community of approximately 1,200 people about an hour’s boat ride away from Yarinacocha, I enquired about female *onaya* and was provided with three names at my first try. In Pueblo Nuevo, a so-called intercultural community near Yarinacocha, I found three more women, two of which I worked with.

³ Pueblo Nuevo (by Yarinacocha) and San Francisco de Yarinacocha.

⁴ *Ayahuasca-Heilerinnen der Shipibo-Konibo (Ost-Peru) im Kontext des spirituellen Tourismus*. University of Marburg, 2008 (unpublished Master’s thesis).

Why are there so few women shamans? Or, asked from another perspective, why are there so many? Shamanism among the Shipibo-Konibo involves the skillful use of ayahuasca, an entheogenic plant mixture which, according to their belief, serves as a vehicle for the shamans on their shamanic travels through the worlds. While women hold their place within the medical system of the Shipibo-Konibo, their role is mainly restricted to handling the non-entheogenic, and thus, non-shamanistic plants:

En el ámbito de la medicina tradicional, hay también una estratificación que discrimina el rol de la mujer: encontramos herbolarias, sobadoras y parteras que son aceptadas y actúan en forma similar a sus colegas varones, pero al buscar entre los que utilizan plantas “maestras” o de poder (chamanes, maestros, bancos, etc.), encontramos muy pocas mujeres. (Giove 2001:36)

Women sow and harvest, treat illnesses with plant mixtures, and prepare herbal remedies for shamans. Many women are credited with an enormous knowledge of medicinal plants (Caruso 2005:163). Furthermore, shamans' wives and relatives are often involved in ayahuasca ceremonies, be it as spectators, or by way of smoking *mapacho*, as an additional guardian for the ayahuasca drinking men, who deeply concentrated in their shamanic travels through the worlds, are vulnerable to witchcraft, *brujería*. The wife of one of the shamans I worked with told me: “Yo de vez en cuando fumo para cuidar. En las ceremonias yo veo los malos espíritus de las personas, y yo le digo a mi esposo: ‘Allá viene otro.’” Making reference to women's complementary healing abilities that are not used publicly, Giove states:

Luego de ser ayudantes de sus maridos curanderos por muchos años, conocen y saben manejar el ritual, pese a que la mayoría permanece de por vida oculta en el papel de ayudante, de complemento. Algunas provienen de familias de curanderos, otras tienen capacidad innata, actúan ayudando a digerir los males que el curandero extrae, vomitan por él, acompañan con el canto sagrado (*ikaro*), equilibran la energía, muchas de ellas son muy visionarias y saben curar. (2001:38)

Despite this, anthropological understanding of Shipibo-Konibo labor division attributes shamanic medicine – a task associated with the public sector – only to men. Women take care of labor associated with the private sector, such as household chores and child rearing (Illius 1987:62). Why is shamanism attributed to men? It is argued that men just like women create their own “reproductive” *métier*. Oriented on Bellier (1991), Colpron understands shamanism to be the men's defended retreat in which they, instead of a biologically reproductive role, take up a cosmologically reproductive role (2005:96f). Roe has a similar viewpoint:

“It is almost as though men, unable to justify themselves biologically through giving birth to children, have begotten instead an elaborately intricate work of intellectual art.” (1982: 269f)

However, these strict divisions of labor seem to have been softening. Especially in urban areas, and specifically among young people, the labor sectors seem to have become more permeable. In the sector of handicraft, this is particularly visible: In 2007 I met numerous Shipibo men that worked in art, creating paintings oftentimes in acrylics.⁵ Roe more than twenty years ago already mentioned instances of men who went beyond the common labor division and engaged in art other than their traditional wood works (1982:43; 1979). However, today’s male artisans create an even different, novel kind of art that must be clearly separated from the traditional female art.⁶

Women’s increasing encroachment upon a traditionally male work area, and with this, upon a public sphere that interacts with the external world, is not surprising considering the developments of the last few decades. Through the commercialization of their handicraft, women have found a source of income that is independent from the men’s wages. They have long since incorporated areas that lie outside of their traditional geographical work area which used to be limited to the village’s boundaries. Female shamans can be seen as an expansion of this development.

However, since the market is seemingly saturated with Shipibo women selling their handicrafts, a need for further sources of income and additional areas of activity prevails. In some cases, tourism oriented shamanism seems to fill this gap.

The Male View

How do male shamans perceive women who take ayahuasca in order to treat patients? In the male dominated world of shamanism, a supportive, caring role is generally ascribed to women. My male informants also pictured the role of a woman as primarily that of a mother. This understanding of the woman’s role in society is congruent with the traditional division of labor. Men in general reacted negatively to

⁵ In these paintings, motives stand out that are based on creative characteristic aspects of Shipibo culture, such as shamanic ceremonies, everyday scenes, and cosmovisions. These paintings generally seem to sell very well to tourists. Other common motives are painted landscapes which strongly resemble in style and theme the paintings from the school of the famous mestizo artist Pablo Amaringo. In male Shipibo art, often claimed to have been produced after the intake of ayahuasca, the typical designs and patterns that dominate the traditional (female) art, are being neglected. If present, seem to serve mainly as ethnic authentication.

⁶ Nevertheless, I have met young men who work in traditional women’s art, painting and even sewing *telas* with the typical ethnic designs. While in some cases, the end product was to be sold to tourists and visitors, in other cases it was meant for home use and not produced with the intention of being sold.

women who cross these boundaries, enter male social territory and switch in ceremonies from a subordinated to a dominating, leading position. Colpron suggests another motivation this: the men's fear of female shamans' manipulation causes them to refrain from an initiation for women (2005:112). This supports the assumption that men are hesitant about opening up their *métier* to women. Illius illustrates that each gender creates its own social sphere in society which is connected to the assigned work areas. In these spheres, men and women socialize among each other, separated from the other gender. While women's social retreat area is handicraft, especially pottery, for men it is shamanism (1987:62ff). Comparable to pottery and painting, shamanic sessions and collective exchange of visions and observations in the spirit world provide a platform of social cooperation and intra-gender bonding. In this context, a male shaman stated empathetically: "Yo no quisiera trabajar con mujeres...[hombres se entienden mejor! [...] Entre varones te cuentan todo. No hay entendimiento ni transferencia de conocimiento con mujeres." This supports the assumption that a rejection of female shamanism could be connected to the men's holding fast to their exclusively male retreat. Based on the interviews I conducted with my shaman informants, male arguments against female shamanism can be divided into three categories: taboos for women, inapt female character, and unfavorable conditions of labor division.

"Es Malo Para la Medicina": Taboo

Among the Shipibo, as in many other societies, certain activities are considered taboo⁷ for a woman when she is menstruating. They believe that the menstrual blood's energies collide with the spirits' energies. Giove defines the blood as a "deshecho contaminante muy perturbador" (2001:39). Therefore, a woman having her period is supposed to keep away from possible contact or confrontations with the spirits' world, and avoid certain places and activities as she would otherwise endanger not only herself, but also others. The taboo furthermore concerns both the preparation and the taking of ayahuasca.

The consequences of the belief that female energy collides with nature's energy and affects the healer's communication with the spirits' world, can also be seen in the

⁷ Cf. Belaunde (2006), who discusses the significance of blood and its connection with gender, knowledge and cosmology in Amazonian indigenous societies.

dieta de mujeres or the *dieta de sexo*⁸ for shaman apprentices or for shamans who further educate themselves. Here, the apprentice during his social seclusion, which is part of his preparation, may only be waited on by a very young girl (“*una jovencita virgen*”) or an old woman (“*una viejita*”) – in other words, women who have not yet begun their menstruation or who have already ceased to menstruate. Traditionally, even visual contact or the mere presence of a woman during the apprenticeship is not recommended. Thus, sexual intercourse during this period of learning or shortly before the taking of ayahuasca is prohibited. The aspect of female reproductivity and the restrictions that come with it contradict the idea of a natural predisposition of women for shamanism, as one male healer explained: “Es malvisto una mujer shaman porque menstrua, fácilmente tiene relaciones, o se embaraza.” During pregnancy a woman can neither take ayahuasca nor diet, as it would harm the fetus. However, a healer must always be ready for assignments and treatment. Colpron (2005) points out that this argument does not generally speak against women as ayahuasca healers, but that it favors on first view a limitation of the apprenticeship and the shamanic activity of a woman to her years after menopause. However, she presents women who have actively followed their interest in the shamanic world since their childhood; thus, before and during their biologically fertile years.

“La Mujer Necesita Cariño”: Character and Bodily Weakness

In the male shamans’ opinion, the training of a shamanic healer is one of the biggest obstacles for women. The social isolation during several months which is needed for the training requires an immense amount of willpower and perseverance. During the apprenticeship, the body of the novice is weakened to the same degree to which his or her mind is strengthened. Furthermore, the apprentice is a constant potential target of other shamans or *brujos*. The dangers posed by *brujería* are surely the biggest threats for a shaman’s mental and physical wellbeing. They are probably among the main factors deterring women to become shamans, besides the severe restriction of food choices and the social seclusion. A male shaman, referring to women, judged the risks as follows: “La mujer es muy frágil – es débil para resistir la brujería. Es así hasta hoy día.” According to my male informants, this lack of mental and physical resistance has also been the reason against training women to become shamans in the past. In

⁸ A component of an apprentice’s shamanic preparation is to follow strict dietary regulations. This diet also includes an abstinence from sexual relations.

addition to the physical weakness of a woman, the female nature also differs from men's. When it comes to following up on the diet, especially the sexual taboos connected with it, the female nature is a substantial obstacle in her way to complete the training. A healer explained this gender difference:

“[La fuerza para el entrenamiento] ya viene enganchado en el hombre. Muchas veces ellos renuncian a tener esposa, porque durante el entrenamiento no se puede tener relaciones sexuales. La mujer en cambio necesita calor, cariño... esto será la razón principal por la que a las mujeres no les gusta hacerse shaman. Las mujeres piensan diferente sobre el shamanismo. Ellas están pensando más en cosas tranquilas, como la artesanía, el trabajo laboral y que puedan vivir en paz. La vida de un shaman es de vivir en dolor. La mujer que quiere hacerse shaman tiene que ser una ‘mujer mujer’ porque sus abuelos la han metido.”

A woman “sins a lot” (*peca mucho*) and due to her “constant need for warmth and peaceful activities” is allegedly less apt characterwise for a challenging and dangerous task such as shamanism. It is argued that she cannot cope with the diet due to her “natural yearning” for closeness and sex. Another male shaman reasoned similarly:

“Para ser curandero se necesita valentía, entrega y decisión. El hombre es más combativo, tiene energías masculinas – la mujer no tiene todo esto, es una madre.”

In this context it proves interesting that it is not the potential shamanic powers *per se* of a woman that is doubted or negated. Rather, it is her lack of physical strength and perseverance. But not everyone agreed with this argumentation, as a comment from a male healer shows:

“¿Si la mujer es más debil en su pensamiento? Podría ser, pero depende de cada persona. Tiene que ser fuerte en sus responsabilidades en la casa, así que es relativo. Por ejemplo, hay una mujer [shaman] en Rio Pisqui que es muy fuerte, más así que su esposo.”

Even though the alleged weaker resilience and willpower of women is one of the main arguments of men against female shamanism, men do differentiate individually when it comes to woman shamans. Once a woman has made up her mind about going the way of a shaman, and immunizes herself against the “constant” sexual temptations, she can, also from a male point of view, become a powerful shaman. Indeed, a woman can learn more in a shorter amount of time than a man, according to two of her male colleagues.⁹ While there are women who have more powers and knowledge than men, according to one female shaman, there is generally no gender specific advantage when

⁹ Also see Giove: “[L]os curanderos antiguos dicen que las mujeres aprenden más fácil.” (2001:38).

it comes to the degree of knowledge and shamanic ability.

“El Papá No Lo Quería”: Division of Labor

Another frequently used argument against female participation in shamanism is the societal definition of which tasks a Shipibo woman should engage in: shamanism is not one of them. A male shaman justified this by saying, “El papá no quería que sus hijas sean shamanes – por las consecuencias de esta actividad.” Ideally, a woman has numerous children¹⁰ whom she has to take care of. This leaves her no time to occupy herself with time-consuming activities outside of this work area, let alone to cope with prolonged periods of social seclusion and intensive preparation. The necessity to travel on a very short notice, as in the case of patients’ illnesses, can require the shaman to be absent from home and family for weeks. Men leave home for longer periods of time for fishing or hunting trips or wage work, whereas women are geographically bound in their work to their home village. The temporary absence of a woman from the household will confront the rest of the family with organizational problems or at least an additional work load. Giove comes to similar conclusions regarding the comparably low number of female shamans:

“Tal vez una explicación simple es que para ser un buen maestro hay que invertir tiempo en preparar el cuerpo con dietas, ayunos, abstinencia sexual, retiros en el monte etc., y que una mujer con cargas familiares difícilmente puede realizar.” (2001:38)

The men’s arguments are based on criteria that regulate society. Labor division and its resulting exclusion of women from shamanic activities is strengthened and justified with arguments concerning female physics and psyche: Women are naturally the more vulnerable and weaker gender, therefore they are not made for a risky life filled with the physical deprivations and mentally grueling tasks of a shaman, in stark contrast to the naturally more disciplined, stronger-minded and more confrontational men.

Women’s View

How do women shamans perceive themselves? When I asked the women their opinion on why there are so few female healers, they also mentioned the taboo (which

¹⁰ This is a task that should not be underestimated, when one takes into consideration that according to Heise Mondino, a Shipibo woman has an average of eight to ten children (1996:45).

their male colleagues previously listed) as an obstacle for female shamanism. Besides this aspect, there are two more criteria that were named: (1) the physical and mental difficulties of the diet, and (2) the risks that are connected with shamanism, daunting for many women. The so-called *pruebas*, “examinations” of the shamanic powers through spiritual attacks during ayahuasca sessions, sent by shamans among themselves, play an important role in this. A female shaman put it as follows:

“Ella está diciendo que hay tan pocas mujeres que toman ayahuasca porque cuando ven visiones, a veces es que ven cosas feas, como si fuera una prueba que ellas deben pasarlo. Cuando no pueden pasar ellas, es que se quedan. Es por eso dice ella que hay tan pocas shamanas. [...] No pueden pasarlo, [...] es peligroso. Pruebas como por ejemplo si realmente sabe o realmente está dietando. Los otros shamanes hacen las pruebas.”¹¹

Women who despite these adversities decide to keep on learning, were described as strong and brave by both men and women. Women wanting to be shamans need to have specific attributes such as audacity, assertive will, stubbornness and decision-making power, all of which are considered gender atypical. These are generally more associated with the male character. Men, for example, dare to enter dangerous grounds (the woods)¹² during a hunt. The ascription of these adjectives shows the exceptional position of female shamans in the perception of the Shipibo. The previously mentioned female shaman described her coping with spiritual attacks as follows:

“Sí hay mujeres débiles, pero por ejemplo la Señora Isabel¹³, ella tuvo el valor de pasar esas pruebas. A ella la querían matar cuando ya estaba dietando, pero ella no se quiere ir, quiere aprender más. Quería ver quién está haciendo daño, cómo [lo] están haciendo. Cada prueba que venía, ella afrontaba, y le animaba más a conocer, aprender más.”¹⁴

The fear of (normal) women of attacks and scary visions which were mentioned by the majority of female shamans also include the reluctance against the bodily effects of ayahuasca. The purging effect of the plant is an important aspect in physical and mental cleansing, part of both curing and learning, but it is also discouraging especially to women. In consequence, women prefer to work rather than to “know”¹⁵. Shipibo generally think that men are less fearsome than women. Many informants saw in this perception the reason that there are predominantly male shamans. Still, according to

¹¹ Translated into Spanish by a Shipibo.

¹² Compare Illius’ description of the Shipibo’s relationship with the woods (1987:9f).

¹³ Names have been changed or left out.

¹⁴ Translated into Spanish by a Shipibo.

¹⁵ Synonym for having shamanic powers.

them, there are women whose physical and mental strength helps them in mastering a demanding task such as curing with ayahuasca. A female shaman said:

“Hay mujeres fuertes, ellas aprenden. *Shegue*¹⁶ – no tienen tanto valor, quieren pero no pueden.) Hay [las] que aguantan su mareación, y hay [las] que no aguantan. Parece que no tienes tus huesos, no hay nada – tiene que pasar. A veces gritan, vomitan. No se puede pasar cuando vomita. Si aguantan, depende del cuerpo, depende de si es fuerte. No es para cualquiera ser shaman. Las de fuerza del corazón, ellas pueden.”

There are other factors besides character strength that influence women's decisions to become shamans and their success in the shamanic apprenticeship. The diet, assessed by men as being especially difficult for women, was also named by female shamans as the biggest obstacle on their way to become a shaman. However, the men's statement that a woman cannot manage without emotional and physical warmth, affection and sex, and therefore is not very apt for shamanism, was contested by the women. They on their part ascribed the susceptibility for succumbing to sexual temptations as a male trait to their male colleagues. A female shaman in this context said:

“[Para mujeres, la dieta] es más fuerte, [pero] la mujer pone más empeño en su dieta. No se puede hacer relaciones dentro de dos años. El hombre para una mujer rompería su dieta – el varón es más exigente en lo de las relaciones, [así que] es más fuerte para los hombres.”

Albeit, another woman narrowed this statement down: For women who live together with their husbands during their first apprenticeship, these restrictions would be too difficult:

“Para empezar [la dieta] es duro. No es para cualquier mujer – mujeres que viven juntos con sus esposos, no es para ellas. Tiene que ser una mujer fuerte para aguantar.”

The consequent alternative, a spatial separation of the female shaman-to-be from her family during her apprenticeship, brings different, organizational difficulties when it comes to taking care of the household and the kids. Several women on top of that mentioned the problem of being provided with diet-compatible food. A shamaness said:

“La dieta no es poca cosa. Es sin sal, sin azúcar, nada de salir. [Es difícil] porque tengo mis hijos. Quién va a mantener nuestros hijos? También van a la escuela, y cualquiera no puede cocinar. [...] Yo atendí a mi esposo cuando él dietaba.

¹⁶ Expression from the Loreto-dialect, meaning: “sin fuerzas, sin vigor, carácter débil” (Castonguay 1987:127).

Cuando yo dieto, quién va a cocinar?”

This can pose a problem especially for women whose husbands are not shamans themselves. If the husband is a healer too, there seems to be a bigger support and understanding – not only when it comes to the execution of ceremonies, but also when trying to meet the dietary regulations of the apprenticeship. Four of the six women whom I worked with were in a relationship where their partners were also healers. Colpron reports that the majority of her informants had had at least one husband that was a healer (2005:103).

Triggers and Reasons for the Shaman's Apprenticeship

Reasons and motivations for women to focus on this healing profession are various and individually different. It became clear in the course of my interviews that several reasons can exist side by side at the same time, or that reasons can change over the course of time. However, in four of six cases, the preoccupation with their own family's health dominated. One female shaman described her motivations to become a healer as follows:

“Yo [veía] los niños que se [enfermaban] y quería curar, con ayahuasca y plantas medicinales. Empezé con mis propios niños. A la edad de 26 años – ya tenía un niño, [y] una hijita fallecida – se fortaleció mi voluntad de saber curar.”

The above mentioned daughter was three months old when she fell sick with a high fever, diarrhea and vomiting and died after three days. Her mother stated that she had not known what to do, or where to take her child. She did not take her to a healer since she lacked sufficient funds.¹⁷ A similar case was mentioned by another woman shaman through our translator. This lady had taken up drinking ayahuasca again after a year of pausing, caused by the involuntary loss of her shamanic powers.

“Ella tomó nuevamente porque veía a sus hijos, su familia, que se enfermaban. Por ejemplo, ella a veces no tenía dinero, tenía vergüenza buscarle a otro shaman, después pagarle, no tenía la plata. Es por eso que la Señora Isabel nuevamente volvió a tomar. En estos tiempos, cuando te enfermas, te vas al shaman. Te cobran caro, mil Soles, a veces quinientos. Por eso la Señora Isabel [...] decidió ser shaman, o sea, nuevamente volvió a tomar la ayahuasca.”

González mentions in her investigation the sometimes troubled relationship of

¹⁷ The services of a shaman, also in rural areas, are not cheap: Costs are often up to 300 soles (at the time of my study, about 90 US\$) for the whole treatment (this often consisting of several sessions) – a sum that an average Shipibo family cannot easily come up with.

some Shipibo to the traditional medical system. Some Shipibo did not only feel discriminated while seeking help from the Western medical system, but also when consulting with the traditional system. This, according to a female healer cited by González, had to do with economic aspects (2002):

“It is often up to the shaman if you recover or not. If you do not pay him as much as he wants you to, he will not try hard enough; he may give you some kind of treatment but only to compensate for the little money you have given him.”

González portrays the acquisition of curative techniques as one of three strategies¹⁸ of the Shipibo to prepare for and handle family health emergency situations, as well as to be independent from needing money for consulting a shaman.

Aspects like the death of close relatives – in the previously mentioned case, the death of the daughter, or in another case, the death of the husband – seem to strengthen the decision to self-help in the medical sector. Health care through the Western medical system via the *puestos de salud* is only rudimentary developed in many villages that are far away from big cities. A report provided by Forosalud in 2004 states that about one third of the population of Ucayali has no access at all to (western) medical care. Of the 185 health institutions of which 169 are *puestos de salud*, 38% provide an only insufficient equipment (2004:13). The lack of trust towards the foreign medical system of many Shipibo is in many cases fundamental. It is often financial factors more than anything else that hinder the Shipibo's access to sufficient health care, both of the indigenous as well as the Western medical system. An important factor, thus, in deciding to become a shaman is economic hardship and its result of limited access to medical care.

In contrast to the male healers who accentuate ideational motivations like curiosity or the feeling to have been born to be a shaman, women seem to be driven by rather pragmatic reasons, the necessity of an additional source of income. Statements such as, “[Lo hice] pensando en la familia”, or the experience of a serious illness (their own: two women; the illness of a daughter: one woman) show that what dominates is the concern for the family and their treatment in cases of emergency. This concern can be met through spiritual tourism as an additional source of income for the women.

In my attempts to understand why there are still women dedicated to shamanism

¹⁸ The two other strategies that Gonzalez names are a close personal relationship with healers from their own as well as from the Western medical system to prevent discrimination, as well as the constructing of “relationships of co-parenthood with mestizos and foreigners who can help economically when ones’ children fall ill” (González 2002).

despite the described difficulties of a shaman's work and apprenticeship, and the obstacles that women especially seem to have to confront, I interviewed young women who had expressed an interest in becoming shamans, and asked them about their motivations behind these plans. What became apparent in these conversations was that the advantages and benefits that the lifestyle of a shaman focused on tourists seem to bring was the strongest motivator. Of the four women shamans of San Francisco with whom I met or worked, two had already (independently from each other) visited the United States upon special invitation. There, they spent several months conducting well-paid ceremonies, giving presentations on their ethnic group and themselves, and selling their handcrafts at far better prices than they could have made in Peru. A young girl whom I asked about her interest in ayahuasca and her motives for wanting to become a shaman, explained the following:

“Quiero viajar a Estados Unidos, a Francia, para conocer, haciendo masajes, tomando ayahuasca. Quiero hablar con turistas. Me gusta hablar con los turistas, explicar cosas. [Quiero] aprender [lo del shamanismo] para explicar a la gente para que comprenden ellos.”

From these words one could extract that more than anything her wish is to establish contact with tourists and to travel abroad. “Shamanism” in this understanding would be more of a door opener or a means to an end rather than a calling to heal patients and travel the spirits' world. The young girls' accounts show how tourism has shaped not only their plans and wishes, but also their perception of shamanism.

Clientele and Shamanic Networking

When looking at the clientele of women shamans, it is noticeable that, with the exception of one's close family, in many cases only non-Shipibo are treated.¹⁹ All women stated that they wanted to work with (more) tourists. The reasons for this are probably financial: not only do tourists often pay considerably higher prices than mestizos or Shipibo, but they are also considered more reliable when it comes to the actual payment. When shamanism is connected with tourism, it is necessary to take a closer look at the people seeking the help of a shaman. Here, a difference needs to be made between a “client” and a “patient”. A patient seeks a curative treatment because he is sick, while a client seeks an experience, oftentimes out of curiosity.

¹⁹ Caruso reports similar observations about a shaman in Iquitos. This very well known healer currently exclusively treats non-Shipibo (2005:66).

Therefore, what is most important to the client is the taking of ayahuasca (often with the aim of learning more about oneself or the indigenous culture). What is most important to the patient is the curing effect of the session; among the Shipibo, traditionally the patient does not take ayahuasca, but the shaman. The client's interest centers on the setting. Because many tourists, as described in my opening story, search for the so-called authenticity of the shaman, for the execution of the ayahuasca ceremony, the curing powers, that is, the shamanic powers of the ceremony leader are not as crucial. (However, the shaman should still be able to spiritually control the ayahuasca drinker's visions.) On the other hand, in the patient's case, the key for a successful treatment is the shamanic powers. People who do not visit the shaman out of illness, but for motives like ordering a love spell or breaking a revenge spell, can be counted as clients.

In contrast to one female shamanic healer who acted only in secret, not wanting other Shipibo to know she was a shaman, the other women in this study did not hide their activities before other Shipibo. Rather, they considered it important to gain publicity among Shipibo and mestizos, and proudly listed numerous locations from where their patients come to see them, including their home communities.

It remains to be contemplated whether the above described secrecy with which one woman acted and the sole concentration on non-Shipibo patients in the case of some of the other women, could be connected (apart from financial motivations) to an intent of trying to avoid judgment on their shamanic knowledge by members of the same ethnic group, who are experts in shamanism. On the other hand, the small number of indigenous patients in some cases could be explained by what Roe (1982:218) calls, "a strong linkage between women and sorcery among the Shipibo" which would make the avoidance mutual.

The same conclusion concerning the evasion of judgment could be drawn from the lack of cooperation with male shamans. Of the six women I worked with, only one woman networked with male healers, some of whom were renowned. The other women deliberately worked by themselves and rejected an alliance with other shamans (that is, the shamans from their own ethnic group).

The presence of networking between healers of both genders could be an additional indicator of the acceptance of the female healers by their male colleagues. Seen from an etic perspective, women who work with an ethnically renowned male healer could generally be respected by the Shipibo public for their shamanic knowledge and powers. This would lead to the conclusion that women's shamanic networking with

traditionally respected male healers can be seen as a kind of professional affirmation of these women's shamanic abilities. On the other hand, a cooperation of this kind benefits the male healer, too: by having a woman shaman present in the ceremonies, female tourists could be attracted by feeling more secure, thus upping that shaman's income.

How Do Men Explain Female Shamanism?

Men portrayed as a modern development the fact that several women hold their grounds as shamans. They either interpreted the occurrence of woman shamans as a form of emancipation, or as a deliberate softening – by men – of the strict rules and laws of shamanism, in order to create a more liberal shamanism in which women may operate. A male shaman put this as follows:

“Las cosas han cambiado. Las mujeres mismas han tomado la decisión de entrar. La mujer ya está ocupando espacios dentro del shamanismo. [...] Han cambiado su forma de pensar las mujeres y hombres.”

Taking its cue from the second line of argumentation, another healer explained that male shamans further the development of shamanic techniques and teachings in order to avoid the negative consequences that the breaking of a taboo caused in the past:

“Talvez yo nací para revolucionar el shamanismo – lo que era tabú, en mi escuela lo superamos. Para nosotros los tabús ya no sirven.”

While in the past during an ayahuasca ceremony, the mere presence of a woman – without explicitly differentiating between menstruating or non-menstruating – was prohibited,²⁰ in present times a change in attitude can be noted among the shamans I worked with (both male and female) when it comes to the taboo of sexual relations and menstruation. For example, none of the female tourists I spoke to were asked before the ceremonies if they were menstruating. A young shaman, described by some of his colleagues as very powerful (which is equivalent to the status of a *meraya*), told me about modified diets that his shamanic teacher gave him in connection with these taboos:

“Para aprender te da tres pruebas. Uno, tomas licor, de allí vas aprendiendo. Dos, haces dieta de mujer para tres meses, después haces sexo y tomas ayahuasca. Tres, haces relaciones con tu novia cuando ella tiene su menstruación. Cuando aprendes

²⁰ However, statements are contradictory here. One shaman stated: “La presencia de una mujer en una sesión – las mismas plantas no lo dejaban. No era por discriminación sino por el respeto hacía el shaman, hacía las plantas” while another one said: “Muchas veces las mujeres eran asistentes al shaman. Realizaban curaciones escondidas.”

ya no es peligroso. El licor y el sexo tienen sus cantos – cuando ya pasaste la prueba no te puede dañar.”

Following this line of argumentation, the taboo about menstruation can be overcome through confrontation. Another shaman added to this as follows:

“La sangre [de la menstruación] es sangre de muerta, una sangre que se ha procriado, ya no sirve. Es sangre muerta. Ustedes [las mujeres] se destoxifican, y es malo para la medicina. Pero nosotros lo hemos superado, tomamos [ayahuasca] cuando tienen su regla [las mujeres].”

In this perception, an advancement achieved by men allows women a place in the male-dominated world of shamanism – if, that is, they do possess the necessary inner strength, the willpower and the perseverance. In this perception, it is not the women who enter male dominated spheres, but rather, it is the men who allow women to enter this sphere. The male claim to be the contributors to an allegedly modern phenomenon, honors female shamanism as a result of the development of shamanistic techniques as well as an adaptation to modern lifestyles and conditions – without the men having to lose their authority in a field that they feel entitled to owning and dominating. Colpron’s analyses contrast with this depiction – she portrays the evasion or overcoming of the previously mentioned taboo as an accomplishment by the women themselves. Making reference to a taboo associated with hunting that applies to menstruating women, she mentions a female shaman that turns her menstrual blood inoffensive to the spirits:

[...] as mulheres *onányabo* podem constituir exceção: por meio de períodos de severas restrições e da utilização abundante de certas plantas, elas tornam seu sangue menstrual perfumado e inofensivo [...]. (2005:114)

Belaunde also states that in many ethnic groups, in order to perform shamanic curings, women have to dominate their menstruation, meaning, become “like men”:²¹

Além disso, entre diversos grupos étnicos, as mulheres conhecem uma variedade de técnicas para administrar o fluxo de seu sangue, adquirem sabedoria xamanística, freqüentam e lideram sessões xamanísticas quando elas “paracem homens”, protegidas do risco de perda da memória humana, acarretada pela multiplicidade transformacional do cheiro do sangue (2006:233).

Conclusion

Are the women discussed in this article indeed shamans? This is difficult to answer due to the lack of an (official) entity among the Shipibo that determines if

²¹ This is based on the notion that in some Amazonas-indigenous societies, blood is seen as a carrier for knowledge (Belaunde 2006:207f).

someone successfully meets sufficient criteria to be recognized as a (qualified) shaman. It should be noted that all of the six women are *healers*, who for different reasons and motivations employ different techniques at different levels of expertise and treat patients in their familial sphere or surroundings. However, the question of whether they can legitimately be called *shamans* (which implies a certain degree of spiritual knowledge and ability), or whether they just call themselves so, for financial or other reasons, without possessing the necessary qualifications, needs to be answered individually. Criteria to aid in this can be factors such as apprenticeship, diet, initiation, reception and position in indigenous society, and possibly the clientele.

The opinions gathered from the male healers give cues about the female healers' reception and position within the indigenous society. Some women shamans – mainly those who also treat Shipibo – are attributed certain shamanic abilities, while others – those who mainly or exclusively work with tourists – seem to fail in this area, according to the men's judgment.

The social position and function of the women in society should not be ignored in finding an answer to this question. Looking at some definitions of shamanism, we will find that the shamanic activity's strengthening of social and societal correlations is missing. Caruso describes the socially embedded position of the shaman – which needs a lively interchange with the rest of the ethnic group – as follows:²²

El shaman Shipibo-Conibo realiza, dentro de las aldeas, un papel social de compleja importancia. Sus tareas en efecto son redimir las disputas, aconsejar en asuntos de pública utilidad, profetizar acerca de los destinos futuros de los individuos y de la aldea, procurar la suerte en la cacería, la pesca y la agricultura, abasteciendo de las plantas que ayuden a las mujeres y hombres a realizar mejor sus tareas diarias (2005:12).

In the case of the healers who predominantly treat Shipibo, the society-related factor of their task is clearly discernable. This is also true to a lesser degree for those shamans who, while they focus majorly on tourists and mestizos, also treat Shipibo despite them having less finances. Regarding this aspect, where do the healers fit who focus exclusively on the treatment of non-Shipibo? Their healing activities do not seem to be activities that support the indigenous society. Rather, they resemble a profession, which separated from the needs of the ethnic group as a whole, and apart from the area

²² Indeed, spiritual tourism is said to have converse consequences by a number of shamans: An abundance of shamans as a result of spiritual tourism furthers a social societal drifting apart, as well as egotism. A male healer put it as follows: "Donde hay muchos shamanes, hay mucha rivalidad por el tema de competencia. Se miden fuerzas, hay mucha envidia. Crea divisionismo – ya no hay familias, hay personas no más."

of social cooperation and influence, puts the individual and their personal gain into the epicenter of importance. By keeping the shamanic abilities and the curative powers secret from one's own ethnic group, it limits the patients to non-Shipibo. This stands in contrast to the shaman's traditional social functions, such as being an entity that regulates and controls conflict in the society.

Furthermore, by looking at the women's clientele, in some cases one can find clues for possible motives for the self-nomination as shamanic healer, even though this might not be warranted. Of the six women studied, only two from time to time treated non-family Shipibo patients. The others worked exclusively for their own family, for mestizos or for tourists. Four of the observed women, therefore, cannot be looked at without considering the context of spiritual tourism. Additionally, it should be kept in mind that in dealing with tourists that have not had any substantial experience with shamanism, a high degree of spiritual knowledge is not necessarily needed for delivering a convincing performance. Ostensibly all that is needed for the ceremony leader to conduct a ceremony of collective ayahuasca drinking in a traditional setting is to have an adequate singing voice. The text and content of the *ikaros* accompanying the ceremony will not convey any meaning for the foreign visitor, who in many cases does not seek healing, but the experience in itself. In reference to those women who according to the listed criteria may not necessarily be *onayabo*, it is noticeable that they generally turn away from patients (who are mainly Shipibo) and turn to clients (who are mainly mestizos who often come regarding spells, and tourists, frequently seeking the experience).

Concerning the diet, another important criterion, it must be noted that only four of the six women had completed it. The length of the diet dictates the quality and quantity of the later curative powers. Therefore, it is to be assumed that a person who has not adhered to a diet, that is, has not acquired knowledge about the spiritual characteristics of the plants, is not a shaman. The healing activities of a person who has not dieted must be restricted to "external" healing techniques, such as massage and the use of a plant's physical characteristics. While four out of the six women reported diet periods *en el monte* that lasted up to three years and were done in seclusion and under the instructions of an experienced shaman, one woman pointed to her "natural abilities" with which she conducted her ayahuasca ceremonies, and therefore allegedly had no need of a diet. In this case, the woman clearly possessed non-shamanic curative knowledge, although it seemed that while she was a gifted *masajista* and *raomis*, she

was not (yet) an *onaya*. She seemed to have taken the ayahuasca-drinking, separated it from the other shamanic regulations and rules, and integrated it into her curative repertoire; possibly out of different, tourism-oriented considerations.

Therefore, are tourism and female shamanism two phenomena that bring each other about? In some cases this might be so, since tourism does not seem to be integrated into shamanism, but rather it seems that an aspect of shamanism (the ayahuasca-drinking) is integrated into tourism.

It could be argued that through the increasing interaction with the outside world, especially spiritual tourism, extended areas of work that go beyond the traditional gendered roles, are created. Women's activity in shamanism can be seen in many cases as an expression of female salesmanship and an aptitude in dealing with the non-indigenous world. At the same time it is proof for a softening of the stricter traditional limits of the gendered work areas. On the male side of this process, this could be related to men engaging in making handicrafts and art production for sale to tourists.

All of the women that I worked with operated in urban areas or close to the city. Their area of activity was clearly shaped by their surroundings. The women's clientele was made up of mainly non-indigenous people, namely mestizos and tourists. This could also be connected with the fact that this group of people might be less prejudiced against female healers: In the mestizo as well as in the touristic surroundings people are familiar with the concept of female healers. Outside of the family surroundings of the observed woman, there were only a few Shipibo who are treated by the female healers or let themselves be treated by them. In times of an increased dependency on economic income (this also being related with their surroundings), the female healers preferred putting their focus on patients and clients like mestizos or tourists who are financially more secure than others. Their main focus seemed to center around the financial benefits their activity would bring them. Looking at their statements about the motives to become a shaman, it becomes evident that four of the six women were driven by an urgent economic need. This in many cases included providing for their family in times of crisis and sickness: Since access to both modern/Western and traditional/shamanic medicine is limited to many of the women due to lack of financial means, training to be a shaman could be understood in many cases as a sort of self-help initiative. Furthermore, the concentration on solvent patients outside of one's own family can be, following Wallis, interpreted as a "transformation of indigenous practices in response to challenging social circumstances" (2003:207). Other motives such as a calling, for

example after overcoming an illness, or line of succession were mentioned, too, but were less frequent.

Under the previously mentioned criteria, only three of the six women I worked with fulfilled the requirements to be called shamanic healers. The effective and competent use of ayahuasca, key characteristic of a shaman, and needed for healing treatments, was not present with the other three women. Instead, their activities are proof of the mechanisms of adaptation developed and employed by indigenous people in their handling of the western and mestizo culture. The work the respective women did was to exploit a new source of income created and supported by a spiritual tourism which receives women shamans especially positively.

The female shamanism that I concentrated on in this essay, up to this point still a marginal phenomenon, needs to be considered bearing in mind its geographic and ideational closeness to the tourism of its urban surroundings; in certain cases it could have been brought about by it. At the same time it illustrates the increasing dependency of urban Shipibo on the external market, and as a consequence, the increased financial needs that for both genders makes necessary the opening up of new sources of income.

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