

CHARLATANS, SEEKERS, AND SHAMANS: THE AYAHUASCA BOOM IN WESTERN  
PERUVIAN AMAZONIA

By

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## ABSTRACT

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Ayahuasca, an entheogenic beverage endemic to the Amazon, has been utilized by indigenous peoples in the region for hundreds of years for a wide range of purposes. Recently however, this beverage has entered into the Occidental consciousness, becoming a facet of Western popular culture and triggering a surge in tourism to the region. As this trend in tourism has grown over the past sixty years, ayahuasca has become increasingly commoditized and delocalized as it circulates on a global scale. Likewise, a number of scholars have critiqued the practice of ayahuasca tourism, labeling many practitioners as charlatans and tourists as “drug” users. In order to investigate this phenomenon and provide a deeper anthropologically informed critique, I draw upon ethnographic fieldwork conducted in 2007 and 2008 in the far Western Peruvian Amazon. Utilizing field data and a review of the extant literature, I argue that the vast majority of shamans participating in ayahuasca tourism rely on an ontology based upon the notions of mimesis and alterity, which in turn structures their practice and experience. Underscoring the political economy of its use, I conclude by problematizing ayahuasca tourism’s uncertain future.

Kayka ñukapak taytamamapakpiz ñuka sumak warmigu Heidypakpiz kanmi.

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# Chapter 1

## Introduction

*An hour, realizing the possible change in consciousness  
that the Soul is independent of the body and its death  
and that the Soul is not Me, it is the wholly other...*  
– Allen Ginsburg, “A Glass of Ayahuasca” (1960)

For at least the past four hundred years, an entheogenic plant-based beverage has been at the center of social practices among Amazonian indigenous peoples. Best known by its Kechwa name, *ayahuasca* (*aya* – spirit, *huasca* – vine) —literally “spirit vine” or the “vine of the dead”—this drink has been used by Amazonian peoples for myriad purposes; healing, divination, spirituality, emesis, purging, warfare, and social reproduction. From these roots in indigenous Amazonia, the use of the beverage spread to early missions and *mestizo* villages, where it blended with the religious and medical ideas from the Spanish colonists becoming the dominant healing system in the region (Figure 1). Beginning in the mid-twentieth century, ayahuasca and its associated practices entered into the occidental consciousness, accompanying the rise of New Age culture. Television programs, music, films, blogs, and books have all aided in the proliferation of the ayahuasca meme, ultimately contributing to the emergence of global tourism associated with the drink. Today, tourists from all over the world, as well as from within Peru, engage in this form of tourism, traveling to the Amazon in order to drink a nauseating hallucinogenic *brebaje* (potion) under the guidance of an “authentic” *curandero* (healer). Tourism, the largest industry in the world, contributes greatly to the Peruvian economy, with over 2,299,000 tourists arriving in 2010—a number that has been steadily increasing since 2002 (MINCETUR 2011).



It is this phenomenon, the spread of ayahuasca related information via globalization and the trend of ayahuasca-based tourism—the ayahuasca boom—that is the central focus of this thesis. The ayahuasca boom, like the previous booms in Amazonia, relies upon the extractive economy endemic to the region (see Weinstein 1983). Here, the components used to make the beverage—the liana ayahuasca (*Banisteriopsis caapi* [Spruce ex Griseb.] Morton) (Figure 2), the leaves of the shrub *chacrana* (*Psychotria viridis* Ruiz and Pav.) (Figure 3), and the numerous plant admixtures used in the brew (Appendix A)—as well as the associated knowledge surrounding its ritualized consumption, enter into the global market where they are heavily commodified, reconfigured, and their symbolic and practical efficacy challenged. Multiple levels of agency engage within this structure of ayahuasca tourism—curanderos, local peoples, tourists, tour agencies, foreign entities, and myriad independent entrepreneurs. The discourses and interactions emerging from these agential meetings aid in the construction of this new, altered form of ayahuasca shamanism, both in Amazonia and across the world.

Ayahuasca tourism, also referred to under the terms “spiritual tourism,” “drug tourism” or “cross-cultural vegetalismo,” is an emergent trend throughout the Amazonian region involving droves of tourists who come to the area to drink the beverage. Unfortunately, the scholarly materials on this phenomenon are quite limited (see for instance: Dobkin de Rios 1994; Dobkin de Rios & Rumrill 2008; Proctor 2000; Tupper 2008; Tupper 2009; Winkelman 2005). The few scholars that have investigated the trend at any length have primarily focused upon one particular source of data, such as working with tourists to uncover their experiences and motivations (Winkelman 2005) or with shamans engaged in touristic practices (Dobkin de Rios & Rumrill 2008). Likewise, these limited studies have marginalized local perspectives in regard to

ayahuasca tourism. Earlier anthropological studies of tourism often duplicated this same binary structure, either examining the impacts of tourism or the origins of tourism itself while ignoring local populations (Stronza 2001:262).

Following Amanda Stronza (2001), I attempt to break away from this construct, focusing instead on a more holistic approach to understanding the trend of ayahuasca tourism. Stronza argues that we still lack an understanding of why certain local peoples engage in tourism not to mention how this impacts tourists themselves (2001:262-3). Informed by a holistic perspective, this thesis elucidates both the local positions—e.g. why shamans engage in tourism at the local level, local perspectives of tourism from those outside of the practice—as well as the impacts and reasoning behind tourists engaging in ayahuasca tourism. Moreover, by exploring the local in relation to the global, one can better understand the contemporary construction of shamanic practice in Upper Amazonia and its future with regard to ayahuasca tourism.

Three primary research questions have guided this study:

- (1) How do the delocalization, appropriation, and commodification of cultural practices, knowledge, and spirituality surrounding the consumption of ayahuasca affect individuals at the local level?
- (2) How does the phenomenon of ayahuasca tourism challenge notions of authenticity and power among practitioners of ayahuasca shamanism?
- (3) How are indigenous and mestizo structures of shamanism altered or challenged by ayahuasca tourism?

These questions allow us to better understand the movement of the various elements which compose the field of ayahuasca shamanism—its associated knowledge, material culture, and aesthetic practice—as a global entity. Through their in depth examination, they uncover the myriad conflicts between individuals both deeply embedded in ayahuasca tourism and those on the margins. Furthermore, through the analysis of mestizo, indigenous, and neo- shamanic structures, one can see the fluidity of such practices in the current era, destabilizing the notion of the ‘timeless nature’ of Amazonian shamanism. Finally, by taking these questions together one can elucidate the various factors influencing the uncertain future of ayahuasca shamanism and its related tourism practices.

### **Ayahuasca: A general background**

Ayahuasca is a term of Kechwa origins, referring to both the *Banisteriopsis* species of lianas—primarily *Banisteriopsis caapi* [Spruce ex Griseb] Morton—and the beverage created from these vines. Although a number of earlier reports exist (see Magnin 1740; Maroni 1737), the first positive botanical identification of ayahuasca was in 1852 by the botanist and explorer Richard Spruce, who located it within Malpighiaceae family and named it *Banisteria caapi*<sup>1</sup> (Spruce 1908:414). Although ayahuasca is most commonly prepared using the vine *Banisteriopsis caapi*, many other types are utilized when necessary such as *Banisteriopsis muricata*, *Callaeum antifebrile*, and *Teraptyrys styloptera* (Ott 1994:16).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Later renamed *Banisteriopsis caapi*

<sup>2</sup> Other varieties include *Banisteriopsis longialata*, *Banisteriopsis lutea*, *Banisteriopsis martiniana* var. *subenervia*, *Lophanthera lactescens*, and *Tetraptyrys mucronata* (Ott 1994:16).

Preparation of the beverage is fairly standardized throughout Amazonia, although all shamans have their own particular styles. Generally, the fresh vines<sup>3</sup> are cut into approximately ten to fourteen inch sections. These small sections are then pounded using a hammer or stone. The pulverized vine is then placed in a large pot, completely covering the bottom. The leaves of *Psychotria viridis* are then added to the mix, which is topped with another layer of ayahuasca vine. Water is added to the pot until almost covering the concoction, which is then simmered for a number of hours until the desired potency is reached. Once prepared, ayahuasca can be stored for long periods in sealed containers, although some practitioners frown upon this, opting for the freshly brewed beverage for each session.

Both the chemistry and pharmacology of ayahuasca are critical for understanding the entheogenic effects reportedly felt while under the influence of the beverage. The main ingredient of the ayahuasca brew, *Banisteriopsis caapi* vine, contains the beta-carbolines harmine (7-methoxy-1-methyl-b-carboline), harmaline (3,4-dihydro-7-methoxy-1-methyl-b-carboline) and tetrahydroharmine (7-methoxy-1-methyl-1,2,3,4-tetrahydro-b-carboline). Harmine and harmaline are potent reversible selective inhibitors of MAO-A, while tetrahydroharmine is weaker as an MAOI but relatively potent as a serotonin uptake inhibitor (Shanon 2002). Trace amounts of other beta-carbolines have been found, as well as the pyrrolidine alkaloids shihunine and dihydroshihunine (Kawanishi et al. 1982:637). The alkaloid concentrations in *Banisteriopsis caapi* range from around 0.05 % to 1.95 % dry weight of the plant (McKenna 1998). MAOIs work by inhibiting monoamine oxidase, an enzyme that breaks down various monoamines such as serotonin. By inhibiting this enzyme, MAOIs increase levels

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<sup>3</sup> Increasingly, shamans in western Amazonia are utilizing dried, market-bought ayahuasca due to the difficulty in procuring the plant in the wild or a lack of land and time in which to grow the vine.

of those previously blocked neurotransmitters. The ayahuasca vine alone can cause an altered state in high enough doses, however, when coupled with *Psychotria viridis* the effects are greatly magnified due to power of the synergistic combination.

The leaves of the plant *Psychotria viridis*, also known as chacruna, contain the powerful tryptamine hallucinogen N,N-dimethyltryptamine (DMT). The alkaloid concentrations in the leaves of the herbaceous shrub range from 0.1% to 0.66% dry weight (McKenna 1998). DMT has the most basic structure of any known psychedelic chemical, only the tryptamine molecule plus two methyl groups and a subclass member of indole derivatives (Strassman 2000). When combined with an MAOI, such as those found in the *Banisteriopsis* vine, the threshold dosage for DMT is around 5 mg when orally ingested (Shulgin & Shulgin 1997). On average, a 200ml dose of ayahuasca when analyzed contained around 30 mg of harmine, 10 mg of tetrahydroharmine, and approximately 25 mg of DMT (McKenna et al 1998).

The action of DMT is that of an agonist on the 5-HT-2A and 5-HT-2C serotonin receptor sites, the primary site of activity for both tryptamine and phenethylamine hallucinogens. However the 5-HT-2C, but not the 5-HT-2A, receptor shows a “rapid and profound desensitization” over time, resulting in quickly built tolerance to psychedelic chemicals (Smith et al. 1998:329). When taken orally by itself, DMT is immediately broken down by monoamine oxidase (MAO) within the gut, rendering it inactive. With the special preparation of the ayahuasca brew—a product of indigenous innovation—the MAOI action of *Banisteriopsis caapi* inhibits the MAO in the gut and liver, enabling the DMT to be absorbed and activated.

The effects associated with ayahuasca generally begin to be felt within twenty to thirty minutes after consumption, peak at around two hours following ingestion, and taper off to a

baseline consciousness after approximately six hours (Riba et al. 2003). Its physical effects are comparable to those of other indole hallucinogens such as LSD, psilocybin and psilocin, producing slight changes in one's cardiovascular system, such as an increase in both heart rate and blood pressure. Soon the user notices a general change in their consciousness, with slight visual hallucinations and an altered perspective. Some also report the presence of a "carrier tone," or "the sound of rushing water," which accompanies this first stage of the ayahuasca experience, filling the user's head (Harner 1973; McKenna 1991). Due to the emetic nature of ayahuasca, participants will often experience nausea, vomiting, and diarrhea, although these effects are not always present. This releasing of "toxins" from one's body is known colloquially as *la purge*—the purge—and is one of the most important aspects of the ayahuasca beverage for local peoples.

As the intoxication continues, the various cognitive changes felt at the initial moments following ingestion also become heavier and individuals may experience depersonalization as their sense of self and reality are radically altered (Riba et al. 2001). At this point the visual effects, derived primarily from the presence of DMT in the brew, begin to take hold. Shooting rays of colored light give way to multi-colored kaleidoscope tapestries of crawling visual hallucinations and phosphene-like imagery (Figure 4). Soon, these visions shift to deeper, more vivid hallucinations as the intoxication progresses (Shanon 2002). Visions often include recurrent imagery, such as snakes, jaguars, distant cities, and plants and animals from the rainforest (Harner 1973:160, 168; Naranjo 1973:183) Philip Descola provides a poetic account of his experience under the influence of ayahuasca:

Against the serene glow of the night phosphorescent circles begin to whirl, then merge and separate, forming constantly changing kaleidoscope designs. One after another all the

symmetrical patterns invented by nature pass before me in a subtle continuum... Animal forms of unrecognized species display their metamorphoses and transformations before my eyes: the water-marked skin of the anaconda merges into tortoise-shell scales that elongate into the stripes of an armadillo, then wings of a *Morpho* butterfly, then stretch into black stripes which immediately fragment into a constellation of haloes standing out against the silky fur of some large cat (Descola 1996:207).

Such descriptions of the ayahuasca experience are quite common, with many individuals emphasizing the hallucinatory imagery over the purgative and other effects. As Descola implies, the visual aspects of the ayahuasca intoxication are often overwhelmingly beautiful, being a large draw for many individuals to turn to the brew, especially those who self-identify as psychonauts (see Chapter 3).

## **Theoretical Background**

Recently, the terms shaman and shamanism have been under fire due to their overuse in literature and somewhat all-inclusive nature, being utilized far outside their original context (see for instance Díaz-Andreu 2001). The word shaman is derived from the language of the Tungus peoples, an indigenous group located in Siberia. Their term *šamán*, which means "knowledgeable person,"<sup>4</sup> has been transliterated into English as shaman and become common place for referring to many different spiritual and healing practices throughout the world (Kehoe 2000:8). Mircea Eliade, a Romanian historian and foundational figure in the study of shamanic practices, defines shamanism as "one of the archaic techniques of ecstasy—at once mysticism, magic, and 'religion' in the broadest sense of the term" (Eliade 2004:3). However, Eliade also viewed shamanism as being primarily related to trance states, as well as argued for a constrained

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<sup>4</sup> Likewise, in many Native American communities, their healers and sorcerers are often times referred to in a similar manner. For example, among many Kechwa speaking communities, a shaman is referred to by the term *yachaj*, derived from the verb *yachana* (lit. "to know"). The Shipibo-Conibo of the Ucayali refer to shamans as *onanya* (lit. "one that knows") (Tournon 2002:80).

usage as a label for practitioners located within Siberia and Central Asia (Eliade 2004:9). While Eliade's work is problematic for a number of reasons, such as having never seen a shaman personally, overall it is quite useful and set the standard for future studies.

Much like Eliade, Kehoe notes that “to routinely apply the label ‘shaman’ to ritual practitioners outside of the word’s Siberian homeland is naive” (2000:101). Jones (2006) rejects the geographical restrictions in both Kehoe’s and Eliade’s views of shamanism, extending the definition to encompass a larger context. He defines shamanism as “a phenomenon consisting of an individual who has voluntary access to, and control of, more aspects of their consciousness than other individuals, and that this voluntary access is recognized by other members of the ‘*shaman’s*’ culture as an essential component of the culture [emphasis added]” (2006:21). This definition opens up geography associated with shamanism, while at the same time allowing the local authentication and legitimization of that practice. Likewise, it also restricts shamanism to those practices in which individuals have control over their consciousness, differentiating shamanic practice from others such as spirit possession.

Moreover, while the term shaman itself has not been traditionally utilized within Amazonian culture—as these practitioners were often referred to as *ayahuasqueros*, *curanderos*, or *vegetalistas*—more recently the Spanish term *chaman* has come to be somewhat commonplace. Much of the older generations still tend to use the term *curandero* more than *chaman*. However, among younger individuals, as well as those connected to either *curanderismo* or tourism, the term *chaman* is used much more often. As such, I believe the term shaman, within the context of the ayahuasca boom, is especially applicable.



Likewise, the term neo-shaman must also be unpacked. Traditionally, neo-shaman has referred to primarily individuals of European descent who have appropriated indigenous religious and spiritual techniques within a structure based on New Age ideology (Wallis 2003:25). A relatively recent phenomenon, emerging in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the New Age is a primarily “consumerist movement,” driven by the expansion of personal spirituality (Aldred 2000:330). Melton (1992:18; 1988:35) views it as a revivalist religion, drawn from transpersonal psychology, and “directed toward the esoteric / metaphysical / Eastern groups and to the mystical strain of all religions.” When shamanism is brought into this structure, it can be thought of as neo-shamanism. Indeed, Wallis (2003:1) argues that neo-shamans utilize this ‘shamanic’ practice as a means for “personal and communal empowerment,” an idea firmly couched in New Age thinking. At the same time, such neo-shamans are often disconnected from the “day-to-day social relations” of indigenous life from which their practices are drawn, and often distort these same practices, leading to a misrepresentation of indigenous culture (Wallis 2003:228). Johnson argues that neo-shamans couch their practice in “radical modernity,” characterized by the “unilineal appropriation” of indigenous spiritual, healing, and religious practices by New Age styled individuals (2003:333). I utilize the term neo-shaman within this thesis to refer to individuals practicing the style of shamanism detailed above, while I will use the terms neo-ayahuasca shaman or neo-ayahuasquero when referring to those that fall within a hyper-syncretic localized structure of shamanic practice as described in chapter four.

Labeled by many as postmodernity, the ever-increasing current rate of globalization marks the lives of humanity today. Roland Robertson defines globalization as the “compression of the world and the intensification of consciousness of the world as a whole” (1992:8). This

compression of the world, linked to the play of capitalism on the global landscape, is characterized by increased flows of individuals, knowledge, material, and capital across the various spheres of social and economic life (Appadurai 2001:5). The concept of globalization is key to understanding the movement of ayahuasca in the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> century. Indeed, ayahuasca is now a facet of popular culture throughout the West and the rest of the world, due to the increased connectedness between individuals in the current era.

Both a consequence and contributing factor to this global phenomenon is the practice of tourism. Tourism is the largest industry in the world with well over 235,000,000 individuals working within it and an estimated investment of \$1,241 billion in 2010 (WTTC 2011). Following Ryan (1991), I view tourism as being linked to an individual's experience in a particular space which is outside of the normal everyday reality. Likewise, this space is constructed within the confines of a larger global market in which tourists' cultural consumptive practices are supplied through local providers in the tourist destination. According to Smith, tourism requires three primary elements in order to function—disposable income, temporary freedom, and a travel ethic (Smith 1981:475). All of these aspects are culturally sanctioned for if they were not then the capital and energy devoted to travel would be diverted to other areas of social and cultural life.

In the tourist's quest, perhaps there is no aspect is more important than that of perceived authenticity. Turner (1994) locates the touristic quest for authentic interactions—even authentic artificial interactions—in a model in which tourists play out fantasies. By feeding into this fantasy system, tourism changes cultures into static “museums,” in which an “illusion of authenticity” is created that reinforces “social and cultural simulation” (Turner 1994:185). Here

we can think of tourism, especially the actions of the host communities, as being sorts of performances in which a cultural simulation is presented. Nash (1996:66) also locates tourism within a quest for authenticity in which the tourist, being alienated in the postmodern era, searches out a “more authentic existence” through travel.

With culture itself being a product within the tourism market, the concept of commodification is essential for analysis. Commodification is the “process by which things (and activities) come to be evaluated primarily in terms of their exchange value” (Cohen 1988:381). The process of commodification leads to a number of issues when combined with cultural practices. While the vast majority of commoditized products have a clear route of production through the combination of labor and capital, cultural facets, however, lack such production markers, making their sale highly problematic (Greenwood 1989:172). When a cultural performance or practice is commoditized, its origins with regard to labor power and the means of production are obfuscated. Some link this process to the notion of commodity fetishism. Selwyn (1996:14) notes that the interaction of cultural, material, and spiritual traditions within a commercial market with tourists leads to forced commoditization under the strain of tourists “culturally drenched by commodity fetish.”

## **Methodology**

My fieldwork was conducted in the Amazonian provinces of Lamas and San Martín, within the department of San Martín, as well as in the province of Alto Amazonas within the department of Loreto, Peru. In this region, encompassing the area where the foothills of the Andes collide with the lowland Amazon rainforest and constituting the transitional area between the *selva baja* (lower jungle) and the *selva alta* (high jungle) we find a large concentration of

indigenous communities; Lamista, Shawi (Chayahuita), Kukama-Kukamiria (Cocama-Cocamilla), and Awajún (Aguaruna), as well as numerous mestizos, foreigners and others. As such, this area is a hotbed for cultural transformation and movement, making it an excellent field site for the study of ayahuasca shamanism. Following Marcus (1995), we can see that as globalization envelopes localized regions, we must expand our focus in order to greater understand the effects. Within the post-postmodern era, our need for a wider breadth of information is necessary in order to understand the myriad cultural processes embedded within the “world system” (Marcus 1995:96-7; see also Wallerstein 2004).

In the field, my research relied on several qualitative methods in my attempt to understand the trend of ayahuasca tourism: (1) participant-observation in both public and private spaces; (2) structured and unstructured interviews with key informants; (3) questionnaires; (4) review of archival and internet data; and (5) video and audio recordings of interviews, ceremonies, songs, and chants.

The primary method of data gathering was participant-observation, where I integrated myself into Amazonian shamanic culture, participating in both the sacred and daily life. Bronislaw Malinowski set forth the tenets for participant observation and ethnographic studies in general, in his seminal tome *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*. While an excellent example of ethnography in its own right, it is the introduction to the text that allows a glimpse into its methodological underpinnings. He states that the ethnographer must “put aside camera, note book and pencil” and join in on whatever may be taking place at that particular moment in time (Malinowski 1961:21). This is the basic spirit of participant observation, to participate in social life—living, eating, and generally ‘hanging out’ with those under study—while at the same time observing and recording it. This is of utmost importance, as if one were not in such close contact

with the group under study, one would ultimately never be able to truly "grasp the natives' point of view" (Malinowski 1961:25). As the ethnographer engages in the daily lives of the people, patterns and themes integral to the interpretation and understanding of social life begin to emerge.

Due to the nature of shamanic healing, with curanderos being spread out across large geographical areas, sample size was difficult to control. However, during my extended stay, I interviewed thirteen different shamans from both mestizo and indigenous communities. While all of the information gathered during these interview sessions was useful, in this text I primarily rely upon the words of three primary informants for the bulk of my data. My sampling method was initially structured, utilizing the internet as well as local sources such as advertisements to locate shamans and their places of business. After situating myself in the field, I also used the "snowball" method of sampling in which various informants and friends introduced me to others who were practicing shamans, tourists, or locals (Goodman 1961:148).

I conducted structured and unstructured interviews with key informants (e.g. shamans, clients, locals, and tourists) from both within cities and the surrounding rural areas (e.g. Tarapoto, Yurimaguas, San Roque, Barranquita, and Lagunas) (Figure 5). Structured interviews were focused on the acquisition of general life history data while unstructured interviews often touched upon myriad subjects to gain a deeper understanding of the informant. These interviews and the resulting narratives not only highlight the numerous connections between social, political, spiritual, economic and ecological life within the upper Amazon, but they are "themselves an important means through which boundaries are overcome and connections created" (Oakdale 2007:6). Much of my work took place behind "closed doors," often in the

homes of shamans, their *consultorios* (clinics), or in their ceremonial spaces—usually a *chakra* (forest garden) with a *maloca* (long house structure) on site. When possible, I created audio and video recordings of healing sessions, allowing for later transcription and analysis. I also recorded all observations, ideas, and other relevant data in my field notes, which were fully analyzed. Finally, archival data from hospitals, health clinics, medical posts, newspapers, police records, and forms of data were gathered. Likewise, for some aspects of the thesis I have integrated data from blogs, websites, and message boards, such as public posts related to individuals' experiences while drinking ayahuasca or visiting an ayahuasca lodge. Through the analysis of the above data, deeper quantitative and qualitative results were obtained.

## **Field Site and History**

The verdant landscape that composes the region of study is quite varied in its composition, due to it encompassing the transition between the *selva baja* (lower jungle) and the *selva alta* (high jungle). As we cross the cordillera of the Andes, and begin our descent down the eastern slopes through the cloud forest, we come to the department of San Martín. This region is characterized by its diverse terrain, shifting between the rolling foothills of the eastern slopes of the Andes and the deep valleys forged by its extensive river systems, most notably the Rio Huallaga and Rio Mayo. The Rio Mayo drains into the Huallaga—the largest river in the region—which begins its descent in the upper Andes flowing down into the lower Amazonian jungle, where it finally drains into the Rio Marañón. The Huallaga is a historically important river, being the primary means of communication from the beginnings of the colonial era up through the mid-twentieth century (Buitron 1948:9; Villarejo 1988:46).

The history of the region is exceptionally rich, although knowledge of the pre-colonial past is quite limited. Much of our understanding of this area prior to the arrival of the Spanish

comes from the archaeological remains scattered throughout the area. In the Paranapura basin west of Yurimaguas, Santiago Rivas Panduro (2003) has done pioneering archaeological work. He has identified seven primary archaeological sites, each with large caches of artifacts. Through an analysis of the ceramic materials recovered from these sites, Rivas argues that the “Balsapuerto Complex” began between 1000 and 1200 BCE. Likewise, the other archaeological materials found within the sites are from a number of other geographical locales, such as Chachapoyas, indicating that salt mines found along the Cachiyacu River may have been an extremely valuable resource during this early period. The foot trails found between Moyobamba and Balsapuerto would have facilitated traversing of mountainous terrain with some ease, allowing those from the lower jungle to have contact with those along the Rio Mayo, or even the Peruvian coast (Castillo 2007:27). Likewise, people could have utilized the extensive river systems in the region, such as the Huallaga, which served as the main route of communications between Moyobamba and the rest of the Amazon (Villarejo 1988:46). Myers (1985) has argued that ceramic styles from the Huallaga valley show similarities to those from the Ucayali valley, perhaps indicating the Huallaga was an important route of cultural dissemination.

Numerous figurines from coastal pre-Colombian cultures such as the Moche have distinct characteristics, such as depictions of animals and plants which are only found in the Amazonian forest, that strengthen the argument that there has been ancient pre-Hispanic contact between the coast and the Amazonian region. Coastal contact could have also originated from the Ecuadorian side. Indeed, as Myers and Dean (1999) argue for the Chambira Uritiyacu basin, prior to 1000 BCE, there were waxing and waning periods of communication between the coastal regions of Ecuador and the lowland Amazonian tropics.

One of the best known archaeological sites in the region of San Martín is Gran Pajatén. Located on the border with the department of Amazonas, Gran Pajatén is part of the Chachapoyas culture and has been dated to approximately 900 AD based on ceramic samples recovered from the area. Another important site, Gran Saposoa, also from the Chachapoyas culture, dates to roughly the same period. These two sites, although not entirely excavated, provide us with tantalizing insights related to the occupants of the region roughly 1000 years ago (Church and von Hagen 2008).<sup>5</sup> These sites were historically important during the reign of the Inca Empire (1438-1533), being the conduit between the Andes and Amazon. Indeed, early Spanish writings seem to indicate that much magical and medicinal knowledge emanated from this region (Cobo 4-LVIII in Elferink 2000:32).

In 1533, following the defeat of Atahualpa and the fall of the Inca Empire, Spanish colonialists began to send expeditions into the western regions of Amazonia (Dean 2009:86; Regan 1993). After having founded the city of San Juan de la Frontera de los Chachapoyas, on the 5<sup>th</sup> of September, 1538, Alonso de Alvarado began his descent in the Alto Mayo valley. Arriving at a point in the river in which they could not pass, they saw a large number of “Motilones”<sup>6</sup> run off into the forest as they approached. Alvarado, sensing that the location must be strategic, seized the area, set up camp and scouted for resources. After occupying the site,

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<sup>5</sup> Other important sites from the region include burials at Chazuta, the Petroglifos de Polish, and numerous remains at Juan Guerra, although little work has been undertaken at these locations (Teixeira 1994).

<sup>6</sup> Motilones, as the Spanish called the ancestors of the present-day Llakwax Runa (Lamista), means “shaven crowns,” referring to the manner in which they wore their hair; shaved “close to the head, with the exception of a fringe left hanging in front to the level of the eyebrows” (Spruce 1908:57). These individuals, known as the Chankas, were originally from the region encompassing the modern-day departments of Apurímac and Ayacucho. However, following a number of defeats at the hands of the Inca Empire, they fled north towards the Amazon region. After being forced out of Junín, the Chankas eventually settled in scattered communities throughout the Mayo river valley in present-day San Martín.



Juan Pérez de Guevara officially established the city as Santiago de los Ocho Valles de Moyobamba on July 25, 1540 (Ocampo 2009:24). Following the establishment of a city within the Amazon, the Spanish moved throughout the region and descended into the selva baja. This can be seen with the early exploits of Alonso de Mercadillo and Diego Núñez, who explored the Paranapura river basin, the present-day home of the Shawi peoples (Castillo 2007:28). As the Spanish Frontier pressed through the area, numerous cities and towns were established; Lamas in 1656, Yurimaguas in 1710, and Tarapoto in 1782.

Following the 1520 pronouncement by Francisco Pizzaro authorizing the subjugation of indigenous peoples throughout Peru, *encomiendas* were instituted throughout the region. An encomienda is a group of indigenous peoples granted to a conquistador under the auspices of the Spanish crown who are then forced to work for the *encomendero* (labor owner) (Mayer 1984:86). The Spanish exploited the pre-Columbian system of the *mita* (communal work), in which individual *ayllus* (communities) paid tribute to Inca leaders through agricultural work. In the Amazon, indigenous peoples were rounded up and forced to work and pay tribute to their *patróns* (labor bosses) (Valdez de la Torre 1921:124). If they were unable to pay—via their own human capital—they were severely punished. Likewise, these indigenous peoples were forced to subscribe to the conquistador's religious doctrines, radically altering their culture (Trujillo Mena 1981:240). In turn, many indigenous peoples fled these Spanish communities (Kubler 1946:373). This facilitated the later land grab as found with the hacienda system as indigenous peoples left their ancestral lands empty (Faron 1966:149).

With the dissolution of the encomiendas, the Spanish implemented a new system known as *repartimiento*. This was much like the former structure, although with a guise that it was not

slavery but forced labor for pay. Abuses were common and the spread of disease, both within encomiendas and repartimientos was rampant, leading to a large decline in the indigenous populations of colonial Peru—up to 40% by the year 1600 (Covey et al 2011). Once again, indigenous peoples were forced into labor, more often than not in mining operations. While the repartimiento, like the encomienda, was quickly abolished, the damage was already done; due to repartimientos, the encomienda system, foreign illnesses, and the reshuffling of indigenous communities through reducciones, the indigenous population in Peru was beginning to drop dramatically (Friede 1967:339). This drop enabled the move which finally broke the tightly bound nature of the pre-capitalist Peruvian culture—the emergence of the haciendas.

*Haciendas*, or large land grants, were a common fixture throughout colonial Latin America. Indeed, for capitalism to truly enter the social space occupied by indigenous peoples during the colonial period, communally held property must be disrupted (Luxemburg 1912). Within the hacienda system, large tracts of lands held by indigenous peoples were granted to Spanish conquistadores or Jesuit missionaries who then forced individuals to work upon them (Reeve 1993). The number of individuals working upon this land varied greatly, with some labor bosses having tens of thousands of ‘employees,’ while others had only hundreds. The hacienda owners were often quite abusive towards their labor force, making them work extremely long hours and beating them if they were unable to produce the needed tribute. By 1560, the vast majority of indigenous lands in Peru had been forcibly taken from these peoples (Faron 1966:145).

The hacienda system, perhaps best thought of as a system of debt peonage, continued on for many years in various forms. Dean (2009:123) argues that the hacienda system, as well as

later forms of economic development in the Amazon, are characterized by “unequal exchange,” with one party (patrones) gaining more than the other (indigenous peoples). Just as in encomiendas and repartimientos, the hacienda system was focused on the extraction of resources, primarily gold and silver. However, agriculture also became a very important aspect, with a number of haciendas being dedicated to sugar production, the raising of livestock, and the sale of grains (Faron 1966:152; Turner 1993:50). It was not until the 1950s that this system began to be dismantled, with various land reforms. However, it was the work of President Juan Velasco Alvarado, following his successful 1968 coup attempt that truly brought down the hacienda system. Through these reforms, the vast majority of land once held by *hacendados* (hacienda owners) was transferred to indigenous and mestizo peoples throughout Peru. This ‘reverse expropriation’ returned land to the labor class, effectively reconnecting their once lost means of production with their labor power.

Beginning in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century, Jesuit missionaries began to arrive in the Amazon in an effort to tame the region’s ‘heathens’. Indeed, the ‘Motilones’ only allowed missionaries and priests into their territories, prohibiting the entrance of soldiers (Myers 1981:156). During this period, from roughly 1616 to 1768, indigenous peoples from all over the Amazon region were forcibly relocated into the newly constructed Jesuit missions (Reeve 1993). Due to the myriad languages spoken by these peoples, the Spanish instituted Kechwa as the *lingua franca* of the Amazon, much as the Inca had done earlier throughout the cordillera. Indigenous peoples continued to be heavily marginalized during the mission period, with horrible brutalities inflicted upon them.

Following the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century missionization of the Amazon, much of the more contemporary history can be couched within a structure of ‘booms.’ Here, economic activity is focused around extractive boom markets, such as with rubber, barbasco, coca, cinchona, oil, and lumber. The first major boom was the quinine (*Cinchona officinalis*) boom. First introduced by the Jesuits to Europe in 1639, it became a prominent commodity in in the late 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, commanding upwards of 100 crowns a pound (Koebel 1913:81). The cinchona bark was so lucrative that the Bolivian government tortured and executed an Aymará known as Manuel Incra for smuggling seeds to Britain. By the 1930s, the Dutch were able to surpass South American quinine production by growing trees from smuggled seeds in Java (Schiebinger 2004:3).

The next boom, and by far the most destructive, was the “*época de caucho*”—the “rubber boom.” The latex from the rubber tree (*Hevea brasiliensis*) was a huge commodity in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early twentieth century. Although starting in the Brazilian Amazon, soon the boom reached the Peruvian Amazonian region, specifically in the bustling metropolis Iquitos. While exports of rubber began at the end of the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it was not until 1892 that the main boom was initiated. It is impossible to overstate the horrific effects this economic boom had on the indigenous peoples who lived throughout Amazonia. Taussig (1986) describes the various horrors, arguing that the experience of the “terror” during the rubber boom opened up a “space of death” in the Putamayo region of Colombia. Taussig utilizes these detailed accounts of torture and murder of thousands of indigenous peoples at the hands of rubber barons to highlight the effect on ideas of social power and healing practices (Taussig 1986:187; see also Chirif and Chaparro 2009). Although the main portion of the rubber boom only lasted a generation, being

most prominent between 1892 and 1914, the effects on the lives of the indigenous peoples brutalized during this period are still being felt today. Around 1914, the rubber industry collapsed due to increased production in the East Indies and tropical Africa, much like what had happened with the cinchona boom a number of years before (Bonilla 1974:74).<sup>7</sup>

Beginning in the first part of the twentieth century, crude oil exploration and production has extremely important to the Peruvian economy. Indeed, from the early 1950s on, various petroleum companies have encroached upon and expropriated indigenous lands while causing immeasurable environmental and social harm throughout the region. Following the implementation of the Tratado de Libre Comercio Perú-EE.UU. (TLC)<sup>8</sup> in February 2009 such production has increased. Indeed, examining exports before the enforcement of the TLC in 2008, Peru produced 43,977,000 barrels of crude oil. However, for 2009, crude exports increased to 53,034,000 barrels, a 20% jump in production (INEI 2011). This is due in part to the provisions set forth in the implementation of the TLC.

In effect, the TLC removed a number of protections previously put in place in regard to indigenous lands throughout the Amazon, opening up the land for oil, mineral, and timber exploration. The passing of the Law N° 840/2006-PE, better known as *la ley de la selva* (the law of the jungle), as well as the now unconstitutional legislative decree 1090, among others, allowed the opening up of some 40 million hectares of indigenous territories, or roughly 60% of the Peruvian Amazon (Hinojosa et al 2009). These laws and their passing effectively re-initiated the

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<sup>7</sup> The possibility of this happening with ayahuasca is actually quite high. According to an individual connected to the largest supplier of ayahuasca vine on the internet, all of their product is grown in Argentina and exported to the United States, effectively removing Peru and other traditional producers from the market.

<sup>8</sup> United States-Peru Free Trade Promotion Agreement (PTPA)

expropriation of indigenous peoples' lands throughout the Amazon. Indeed, Marx notes that expropriation is the “dissolution of private property based on the labor of its owners,” and this is exactly what is taking place in Amazonia today as the TLC removes communal property from indigenous peoples while at the same time utilizing their labor power for capitalist production (Marx 2003:713).

Palm production is also heavily tied into the TLC agreement, with companies such as Grupo Romero and others utilizing the law to their advantage in order to gain more land throughout the Amazon region. In fact, in just six years, the amount of land devoted to the production of palm rose significantly, from 8,864 hectares in 2003 to 18,271 hectares in 2009—a number which is expected to continue to grow (BCRP 2010:24). In the small town of Barranquita, located at the confluence of the Rio Cainarachi and the Rio Yanayaku, the effects of this movement towards palm production can be clearly seen. Grupo Romero, over the past ten years, has steadily either bought lands or been granted them through the Peruvian government, effectively gaining well over 10,000 hectares outside of Barranquita (Ponce 2010). As the land is expropriated, those who once worked on it have either been forced to move on to other areas for subsistence or to work for Grupo Romero. Unfortunately, this is becoming an all too common theme throughout the Amazon region, leading to many strikes and conflicts.

With their livelihood being challenged, as their means of production are taken out from underneath them, both indigenous and mestizo individuals began a general strike following the implementation of the TLC. Beginning on the 9<sup>th</sup> of April, 2009, these individuals began a general strike in Amazonia as their cries for participation in the political process fell on the government's deaf ears (Servindi 2009). Throughout the entire region, indigenous peoples and

mestizos alike blocked roads and rivers, while a group of Awajún took over a Petroperú oil lot. Soon a national state of emergency was declared and the Peruvian government sent national police and military to the site of a large blockage on a stretch of highway between Cajamarca and Moyobamba known as the *Curva del Diablo* (Devil's Curve). Outside the city of Bagua Grande, on the afternoon of June 5, 2009, these security forces clashed with some 5,000 protestors, ending with the deaths of at least 22 indigenous and mestizo protestors as well as nine police officers. The next day, a group of Awajún at the PetroPerú lot #8, killed another nine police officers that they had previously kidnapped some time earlier (Arévalo 2010:2617).

The aftermath of this event, known as the *Baguazo*, is still being felt today. Although major changes were implanted following the end of the strike, many of the same problems remain. While a number of the laws which the indigenous and mestizo individuals were protesting were subsequently struck down, there still remains the *ley de la selva*, allowing continued oil, timber, and mineral exploration as well as the government facilitated expropriation of Amazonian territories. This continual expropriation has led to a deadlock in political talks between the Pan-ethnic federation AIDSESP<sup>9</sup> and the Peruvian state. Indeed, AIDSESP's current president, a Shawi *apu* (leader) named Alberto Pizzango, has said that the national discourse related to modernization and development, coupled with the limited participation of indigenous peoples in national politics, has made any reconciliation between the government and the *pueblos indigenas* impossible (RNV 2011). This experience of the Baguazo has marked the lives of the many individuals living in the jungle, with violence reminiscent of the era of terrorism associated with the *Sendero Luminoso* (Shining Path).

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<sup>9</sup> Asociación Interétnica de Desarrollo de la Selva Peruana

The 1980s were characterized by more violence in the region, related to two different although connected fronts—the coca boom and the war between the Sendero and the Peruvian government. The rise of the Sendero Luminoso, a Maoist revolutionary group headed by Abimael Guzman with the purpose of taking down the government, marked the lives of those living during this period with heightened terror. Individuals lived each day in fear of both government agents and Sendero revolutionaries who would enter their villages for supplies, with these meetings often times ending with death or injury. Richard Kernaghan notes (2009:26-7) that the marginal highway that runs between Tingo Maria and Tarapoto was dotted with corpses during this period, creating another “space of death,” which acted as temporal signs for the control of local populations. Likewise, the increased consumption of cocaine hydrochloride (HCL) during the 1980s contributed to the emergence of the coca boom, with thousands of hectares in the region devoted to the cultivation of the plant.

While today Moyobamba remains the capital of the department of San Martin, it is Tarapoto that is the cultural, commercial, and touristic hub of the region (Figure 5). Having the only airport in the area servicing large jets, Tarapoto is often the first stop for many tourists. The city located in a deep valley and composed of three separate districts—Morales, La Banda del Shilcayo, and Tarapoto—has roughly 130,000 inhabitants (INEI 2010). On the north section of the city, the Rio Shilcayo marks the boundary between the districts of Tarapoto and La Banda, while the south side is bounded by the Rio Cumbaza. There are a wide range of ethnicities within Tarapoto; indigenous peoples such as Lamistas, mestizos, whites, Chinese, and Europeans to name a few.



The economy of Tarapoto is primarily based around agricultural practices such as the production of palm, rice, plantains, piñon, and other agricultural goods. Likewise, the extractive economy discussed earlier plays a massive role in the economic structure of Tarapoto. Aside from government permitted extraction of resources like oil, lumber, palm oil, and others, we also see the prevalence of illegal resources. Due to its location between the low and high jungle, huge amounts of contraband—lumber, animals, cocaine—pass through its borders, on their path from low jungle regions such as Barranquita and Yurimaguas to the coast. While the “coca boom” as defined by Kernaghan has passed, cocaine production remains a critical industry in the region, with clandestine laboratories and drug smugglers around Tarapoto being uncovered on a weekly basis.

Approximately two hours north of Tarapoto, following the IRSA-Norte highway (Fernando Belaunde Highway), one arrives at the capital of the province of Alto Amazonas—Yurimaguas. Strategically located at the confluence of the Rio Paranapura and the Rio Huallaga, Yurimaguas has been a historically important Amazonian port for well over two hundred years. With a population of 69,996, Yurimaguas is a highly diverse community with a large concentration of indigenous residents. Indeed, just within the province of Yurimaguas one can easily interact with individuals from Lamista, Shawi, Kawapanas, Shiwilu, and Kukama-Kukamiria communities (INEI 2010).

The primary economic activities in Yurimaguas are agriculturally based—with logging, palm production, and fishing being at the forefront. Just as in Tarapoto, an illicit extractive economy underlies the traditional economy, supplementing it with funds generated through the illegal lumber and drug trades. Traditionally, Yurimaguas is utilized by tourists as a hub, arriving

from Tarapoto only to hop on a *lancha* (river boat) and head down the Río Marañón to the city of Iquitos. However, the recent introduction of a new municipal government has shifted the focus to the increasing of tourism in the area, with plans already in place for the construction of an international airport.

## Overview

In chapter two, I attempt to disentangle what is commonly referred to as ayahuasca shamanism. Here I examine its (limited) archaeological history and various theories surrounding its emergence. Following the historical background, I provide an in-depth examination of the social importance of ayahuasca shamanism within indigenous communities in order to demonstrate its position within a continuum of practice. The second half of the chapter focuses on the structures of mestizo shamanism, or *vegetalismo*, throughout the western Amazon. While indigenous shamanism highlights the social implications of practice, *vegetalismo* is much more ego-centered, with individuals taking the center stage rather than the larger social reality. To further differentiate the two ideal types, I present an in-depth overview of the ritual practice and knowledge associated with *vegetalismo*, emphasizing the individual versus social centered approach, while at the same time highlighting the high amount of overlap between the practices.

Chapter three presents an overview of the phenomenon variously known as “cross-cultural *vegetalismo*,” “drug tourism,” or, the term I prefer, ayahuasca tourism.<sup>10</sup> Here, I delve deep into the history of the ayahuasca “meme,” locating its emergence with late 19<sup>th</sup> century texts from various explorers, chemists, and botanists who had travelled through the Amazon.

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<sup>10</sup> I prefer ayahuasca tourism as it encompasses the main facet of what the individual tourists are seeking. While they may hope to be healed or gain spiritual insight, this is facilitated through the imbibing of ayahuasca.

Following this emergence, I trace the flow of ayahuasca related information through the 20<sup>th</sup> century, focusing on the emergence of ayahuasca tourism over the last sixty years. I then examine the current state of the phenomenon, examining the various lodges, travel packages, and discursive practices associated with the trend.

In the second half of chapter three, I focus upon the both the tourists who partake in ayahuasca sessions in Amazonia as well as the ayahuasqueros who administer these sessions. On the side of the tourists, I draw from interviews conducted in field to construct a critical perspective which locates many of the ayahuasca tourists within New Age paradigm—consuming new experiences, fulfilling feelings of disconnection with spirituality, and rejecting biomedicine in favor of alternative treatments. Likewise, there have been a number of critiques of shamans who work with tourists, perhaps most notably in the work of Marlene Dobkin de Rios. In order to move past this negative perspective, I present overviews of a number of ayahuasqueros who I have had the chance to interview and work with during my numerous fieldstints. While there may be a few “bad seeds” that exist in the world of ayahuasca tourism, for the most part, it seems that all individuals fall into what I believe is an ontological framework for “shamanizing” in Amazonia.

Chapter four is composed of my theoretical analysis of ayahuasca shamanism in the current era. In response to earlier critiques which questioned the authenticity of shamanic practitioners who participate in ayahuasca shamanism, especially those labeled as “neo-shamans,” I present an argument that locates the vast majority of shamans in the Amazon within an ontologic framework which structures practice. Drawing upon the works of Michael Taussig, Jean Pierre-Chaumeil, Walter Benjamin, and Pierre Bourdieu, I argue that the ontology utilized

within ayahuasca shamanism relies upon the concepts of mimesis and alterity. Here distance—both temporal and physical—in regard to knowledge, practice, and aesthetic values, is utilized as a form of syncretic power that structures shamanic practice. Through this argument I propose that the vast majority of neo-shamans practicing today in the Amazonian region utilize a historically based habitus which draws upon the Other as a source of knowledge, aesthetics, and power. Likewise, the level of alteric properties integrated within the shamanic practice as well as the locale in which the shaman works aids in the determination of the shaman's placement within the continuum.

In the final chapter I elucidate the problematic of ayahuasca tourism in relation to safety, social change, commoditization, and resistance, before pondering its uncertain future. Within the realm of safety, numerous issues, e.g. theft, rape, psychological duress, physical ailments, and even death, can arise while engaging in ayahuasca tourism. Many of these issues are related to the practice of charlatans, utilizing newfound occidental interest in ayahuasca as a means to generate capital. However, the prevalence of these charlatans is questioned, based upon ethnographic investigation, with them seemingly being more of an invisible specter drawn up from rumor and isolated incidents rather than a large force, at least in far western Amazonia. I examine the commodification of ayahuasca in relation to tourism with regard to local perspectives. Here one can see how construction of commodity forms is limited by local peoples, specifically in regard to price structure and the geographical dislocation from the commodity source. I then draw upon local perspectives in regard to the legitimacy of ayahuasca tourism practice, utilizing interviews with shamanic practitioners, indigenous peoples, and other locals, demonstrating that there is much strife within Amazonia, with some being firmly against

ayahuasca tourism. Often those who are against it engage in resistance, their communities refusing to participate in the practice, while those deep within its structure, such as the myriad lodges, aid in the further dispersal of ayahuasca related information. I argue that this interplay, while altering the structure of ayahuasca shamanism in Amazonia, also strengthens its sociocultural emplacement. However, as ayahuasca tourism as a trend continues to grow, its continued survival remains uncertain.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Ayahuasca Shamanism in Western Amazonia**

The majority of scholarly works on shamanism in western Amazonia have focused on its socio-cultural emplacement within indigenous societies (see Brown 1986; Chaumeil 1998; Dean 2009; Harner 1984; Whitten 1976). Contemporary social commentators posit indigenous ayahuasca shamanism as being central to the cultural reproduction of society: shamans procure food, instill personhood, heal disease, transmit knowledge, make myth into reality, and maintain a cosmological balance through their social practices and cultural knowledge (Chaumeil 1998:243; Dean 2009; Fausto 2004:168). While defining one as indigenous or mestizo is exceedingly difficult in Latin America, I believe these categories are useful ‘ideal types’ when examining and analyzing shamanic culture in Amazonia (Conklin 1997:727; Dean and Levi 2006; Weber 2010). In this chapter I will begin by examining the origins and history of ayahuasca shamanism. I will then disentangle the continuum of practice which flows between rural/indigenous shamanism and urban/mestizo shamanism, demonstrating the high-level of overlap between the two as well as their differences, which will then be later connected to neo-shamanic practice.

Scholarly understanding of the history of indigenous ayahuasca shamanism is limited for many reasons. The preservation of archaeological artifacts in the jungle environment is extremely difficult, due to the poor soil conditions, high humidity, and the changing courses of rivers. Likewise, the undertaking of archaeological fieldwork in jungle regions is problematic due to logistics, the environment, and ecological issues (Cleary 2001:69; Whitehead 1996).

Despite the dearth of Amazonian material history, there are clues from the sites located along the coasts of Peru and Ecuador which indicate the presence of shamanic activity, and perhaps, the usage of ayahuasca.

A number of artifacts from the Valdivia culture (dating from 3500 BCE to 1500 BCE) are theorized to be some of the earliest depictions of shamanism in the Americas (Staller 2001:19). The most striking of these artifacts are a collection of small, feminine, anthropomorphic figurines (Figure 6). A number of theories have been proposed for the purported use and cultural meaning of the figurines. Early theories posited the use of the figurines in curing rituals or as agricultural magic (Di Capua 1994:231). Peter Stahl argues that the figurines are examples of art modeled after visions seen while under the influence of entheogenic plants such as ayahuasca and served as “mundane abodes for summoned spirits” (Stahl 1986:146). This argument draws on a number of features—such as the use of red slip in coloring the figurines, their facial expressions, short-cropped hair, and their ritual destruction—which Stahl believes are indicators of hallucinogenic activity. The presence of these figurines could also be indicative of ayahuasca shamanic activity, although due to the nature of archaeological investigation, much more research needs to be undertaken.

Plutarco Naranjo, building his argument through an in-depth examination of artifacts from multiple sites to the west of this region, posits that ayahuasca shamanism dates back to at least the Pastaza phase (2000 BC to 1000 BC), and perhaps as far back as the Sangay phase (~2300 BC) (Naranjo 1986:121). He notes that this area—which begins just west of Quito, on the other side of the *cordillera*, extending north to the province of Esmeraldas—has large populations of *Banisteriopsis spp* growing in its jungle environment (1986:118). Naranjo bases

the bulk of his argument on the presence of small ceramic bowl-like vessels or cups, usually painted with designs, which were found at many sites in the area. Naranjo believes that the vessels' small sizes are related to the ingestion of ayahuasca, as similar containers are used by indigenous peoples in Amazonia today. Moreover, distillation was unknown to pre-Columbian populations, erasing the option of their use in the imbibing of alcohol (1986:121).

In contrast to ancient explanations regarding ayahuasca shamanism, Peter Gow places its contemporary emergence, both within mestizo and indigenous communities, as coinciding with the colonial construction of urban environments in the Peruvian Amazon, specifically locating shamanism within the missionization of the indigenous peoples of Amazonia. In this context, ayahuasca shamanism was “exported from these towns to become the dominant form of curing practice in the region” (Gow 1994:91). Gow bases his argument on the fact that there are a number of indigenous communities—such as the Sharanahua, Cashinahua, Culina, and Harakmbút—which were spared much colonial contact, being “buffered” from the ill effects of the rubber boom (1994:110). Within these communities, the practice of ayahuasca shamanism is much different than commonly found throughout Amazonia.

In effect, the emergence of mestizo shamanism categorically modified the structure of shamanism within numerous indigenous communities as newly emergent practices were quickly integrated. Gow views contemporary ayahuasca shamanism, be it within indigenous communities or urban mestizo cities, as a direct response to colonial contact, as a “cure for the disease of western Amazonian colonial experience” (Gow 1994:111; see also Taussig 1987:127). Indeed, with the implementation of the *encomienda* system, the later Jesuit missionization, and the various “booms,” indigenous peoples have a deep history of exploitation and abuse at the



hands of the myriad outsiders that have invaded their territories. Through the use of ayahuasca shamanism, indigenous peoples were able to invert the power structure of colonialism, using the horrors of colonial contact as the fuel for their practice.

### **Indigenous Ayahuasca Shamanism**

Regardless of the origins and history of ayahuasca shamanism, its integral role in indigenous social organization, cultural reproduction, and cosmology is without question. While there is tremendous variation among indigenous groups practicing ayahuasca shamanism, there are a number of core themes or tropes that can be teased out of the various ethnographic texts available. My elucidation of shamanic practice among indigenous communities is not in any way meant to be exhaustive but rather underscore key themes that situate our understanding of contemporary Amazonian shamanism.

Scholars have shown that indigenous forms of shamanism are focused on social themes, such as social cohesion and cultural reproduction. For his part, Whitten connects ayahuasca shamanism to the much larger social structures in indigenous society, noting that among the Canelos Quichua of Ecuador the “contemporary Runa *ayllus* (segmental, territorial, and maximal clans) exist as expanding, outward-ramifying consanguineal-affinal chains of linkage reckoned from contemporary shamans and from the shaman parents of contemporary old people” (1976:141). While healing is of paramount importance in indigenous traditions, ayahuasca shamanism finds its way into almost all realms of regional society, from art to myth, and even as far as the bestowing of personhood upon individuals. In order to accomplish these many tasks, ayahuasca shamanism relies on a number of techniques and ideas that give it its efficacy in indigenous societies.

The indigenous peoples of western Amazonia have been blending pharmacology, health, and spirituality for millennia, resulting in a unique culture centered on the complex systems of knowledge glossed here as “shamanism.” How the shaman utilizes altered states of consciousness in order to gain knowledge, heal, restore cosmic order, and realize mythology is a key facet of indigenous social structures (Jackson 1983). It is this shamanic power which is critical in social reproduction, and by extension, the very re-affirmation of the reality and social life of numerous indigenous peoples. As will be demonstrated in this section, ayahuasca consumption and its shamanic practices interact with all niches of indigenous life—e.g. ritual practice, initiations, fish poisoning expeditions, hunting, curing, and fruit gathering (Reichel-Dolmatoff 1975:133).

Shamanic practitioners in indigenous Amazonia, with their specialized capabilities, are able to reportedly separate their souls from their bodies and travel throughout the spirit world (see for example Roe 1982). In this regard, shamans appear to have the capacity to enter a liminal state, suspended between the constraints of the known social reality/order. Maintenance of cosmic “balance” between the various layers comprising the world is said to provide the shaman with the capacity to ensure social harmony for personal healing or, on the other hand, cause great misfortune (Reichel-Dolmatoff 1975). Likewise, this capacity for maintenance of liminal states is the source of much tension, as these shamans can easily cure as well as kill (Buchillet 2004).

The concept of dark shamanism is extremely important for the vast majority of indigenous peoples in Amazonia that engage in ayahuasca shamanic practice. When apprenticing

to be a shaman, one must engage in the dark side in order to tame it; that is, by utilizing the power to injure or even to kill, one is able to cure. Often for individual healings, indigenous shamans utilize politicized discourses focused on this ambiguity, attempting to assert their power and control over patients and family members (Brown 1988:116). Whitehead and Wright (2004:12) see the dark shaman as being an integral agent in indigenous social structure, arguing that “even if the sorcerer is a highly antisocial figure he is so with regard to an evanescent set of social relationships, and his actions may paradoxically ensure the possibility for sociality through his propitiatory relationships with the predatory cosmos that might otherwise consume humanity and destroy the beneficence of the earth” (see also Chaumeil 1979:41; Gow 1994:102; Harner 1973:20; Hoopes 2007).

There are a number of ways for an individual to become a shaman. Among the Yagua, there are four primary ways to be initiated into shamanism; (1) personal desire, (2) collective desire, (3) sign from a dream, or (4) the death of a relative or affine (Chaumeil 1979:40; Cf. Eliade 2004:13). Here we can see the deep intrinsic social nature of indigenous ayahuasca shamanism, with two out of the four options being directly related to larger Yagua social reality and practice. Likewise, for the Desana of the Vaupes region of Colombia, young males must manifest a propensity for understanding the nuances of mythology, the social life of plants, and the multifarious uses of various altered states of consciousness. Once the interested individual has proven he is worthy, the novitiate then asks an elder shaman to train him in then shamanic arts. This training is long and arduous, lasting in some instances a number of years. The initiate is obliged to follow ritual prescriptions and taboo—such as dietary restraints, sexual prohibitions, and restrictions on other indulgences (Jackson 1983:196; Reichel-Dolmatoff 1975:122). Much

of the initiate's time during this shamanic training period is spent alone in the forest, where they are required to consume copious amounts of hallucinogens. This notion of the diet—or *la dieta* as it is known throughout most of western Amazonia—is integral in the production of shamanic power and knowledge, for both indigenous peoples as well as mestizo and neo-vegetalistas, a topic which will be explored further in the following the section. After this lengthy training period the elder shaman begins a ritual which deconstructs the prior identity of the initiate and reconstructs them as a shaman (Reichel-Dolmatoff 1975:83; Reichel-Dolmatoff 1996).

In Amazonia, mythology contains boundless knowledge that is passed down orally through multiple generations in varying socio-cultural and historical contexts (pre and post-colonial). Much of the taboo and ritual associated with shamanic healing is directly taken from these orally transmitted “texts.” During indigenous shamanic training, initiates are expected to memorize long passages of mythology, stories of ancient ancestors, and chants which they must then integrate into their ritual. These mythopoetic genres act not only as a means of knowledge transmission and creation, but also as a form of real power. As the shamans themselves are the ones who know the myths, they also have a vested interest in their reproduction, understanding, and social integration. We also see the paramount importance of ayahuasca within the social lives of indigenous peoples with its presence in mythology. Indeed, for the Tukano as well as other groups, a number of myths linked to the first periods of creation are centered on the consumption of ayahuasca (see Dean 2009; Reichel-Dolmatoff 1971:255-265).

Universal and personal imbalance is of central concern for many indigenous peoples. For example, the Tukano universe is thought to be composed of three primary superimposed layers: the celestial vault, the earth, and the netherworld (Reichel-Dolmatoff 1982:170). These layers

can be seen as a circuit of cosmic energy flow with limited potential, which must be balanced to maintain social harmony.<sup>11</sup> As such, the Tukano people believe that they must do everything within their power to maintain this delicate balance of cosmic energy. In this cultural context, often times social problems can be viewed (by an “outsider”) as medicalized, with the only socially acceptable “cure” being a group ayahuasca session. This communal ritual is performed several times a year depending on need. The designated shaman, assisted by a few other select men, prepares the sacred brew and invites others to participate in the solemn ceremony. In this gender-segregated society, the group sits in a semi-circle in the center of the chosen maloca with the women gathered near the back. The shaman dips a cup into the brew and passes it around to the men. The men will sit in silence until the first effects of the concoction are felt. At this point, the shaman tells the men that the old “traditions” are in danger and that he is the only one that can still teach them the religious or sacred foundations of society (Reichel-Dolmatoff 1971).

When the men hear the sound of rushing water or wind, the shaman explains to them that this is their ascent into the “Milky Way.” He tells them that they must leave this world and go on a voyage with the winds. This initial altered-consciousness phase ends, and the next phase, known as the descent to paradise or *Ahpikondia* begins. The men will then begin to see the different animals of the vast Amazon Basin. They will see the actions of the animals and begin to understand the roles these animals and their spirit helpers play in their society. They will see the anacondas of the forest, the beginning of time, the birth of the first women, the birth of the first man, and other mythic events associated with the creation of the world (Reichel-Dolmatoff

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<sup>11</sup> This is a common theme throughout indigenous groups of the Americas. For instance, the Yagua also believe in the existence of a universe composed of eleven layers, of which certain sections can only be traversed by shamanic practitioners (see Chaumeil 1983). Likewise, the Secoya delineate ten layers in the composition of the universe (Roe 1982).

1978:4).<sup>12</sup> This second stage is seen as a “return to the womb,” a return to the time of creation.

This communal session of hallucinogenic experience reaffirms the Tukanoan’s broader view of reality, while at the same time brings about a shamanic cure for societal ills through the rebirth of universe.

In a similar vein, the Tukano male puberty ritual, the ‘*He wi*’ ceremony, is perhaps one of the most important rites in Tukano culture. During this ritual, the male initiate is introduced into the world of adulthood. Consisting of both initiates and the initiated, the shaman leads the ceremony in a specially designated longhouse. The men drink *chicha*, ingest snuffs, and consume ayahuasca throughout the sacred event. During the peak of the ceremony, the maloca is transformed into the mythical ancestral universe. Indeed, as the ancestral world is brought into being, the male community is rendered as being dead (Jackson 1983). With the men “dead,” they assume the fetal position, allowing the shaman to instill the initiates with a new social identity, achieved through a metaphorical ancestral rebirth, which deepens their connection with the ancient, spiritual world.

As shown above, indigenous ayahuasca shamanism, among the Tukano peoples of Colombia as well as many other indigenous groups, has deep social import. The importance of shamanism within indigenous communities can never be overstated; it is an essential binding agent which holds the society together. Ayahuasca shamanism as a means of social reproduction—i.e. instilling personhood, mythopraxis, etc—is the defining aspect which allows one to view indigenous ayahuasca shamanism as being distinct from vegetalismo. We can see the deep connections between mythology, history, shamanism and the larger social structures

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<sup>12</sup> See also Goldman (1979:211) for a description of the importance of the ancestral past in Cubeo ayahuasca ritual practice.

within indigenous shamanism. Indeed, as shown with the Tukano, ayahuasca shamanism's importance is highlighted by its inclusion in the group's various creation myths. Similarly, the Urarina link ayahuasca shamanism not only to the primordial world, but also to the larger context of humanity's continued survival, noting that "when all of the shamans—the ayahuasqueros—of the jungle disappear the world will come to an end. All of the Peruvians will die. It is the shamans who now maintain this world, but when they are all gone, pucha, pucha [explicatives]!!" (Dean 2009:239). This explicit connection between ayahuasca and the social world is the defining aspect of indigenous shamanism. However, this ideal type is much different than that encountered in many Amazonian communities today as global pressures exert their forces on local culture. With a constant feedback between indigenous communities and the "outside world," we see major changes taking place in the structure of ayahuasca shamanism, a theme which will be explored in depth in chapter five. We can now turn to the phenomenon of "traditional" mestizo shamanism, or vegetalismo, another ideal type that situates itself within the middle of the shamanic continuum.

### **Mestizo Ayahuasca Shamanism**

Mestizo shamanism, or more specifically vegetalismo, comprises a complex of practices primarily involving the use of various plants to sources of knowledge as well as to cure, harm, and confer luck, among others. While mestizo shamanism has many different practitioner types (*hueseros*, *quirománticos*, *pusangueros*, *paleros*, *tabaqueros*, *perfumeros*, *toéros*, and *ayahuasqueros*), I intend to focus primarily upon vegetalista practice specifically within the realm of ayahuasca shamanism (Barbira-Freedman 2002; Ponce 1975:10). Vegetalismo, a syncretic system constructed through a blend of Catholicism, Spiritualism, and indigenous shamanic ideas, is integral to the social reality of urban and peri-urban life in Amazonia.

Barbira-Freedman defines *vegetalismo* as the “study of plants as guides to ecology and ethology in the cosmos” (2002:143). Unfortunately, the literature surrounding this healing and spiritual system is extremely limited (Beyer 2009; Dobkin de Rios 1970; Dobkin de Rios 1973; Luna 1986). Although there is a massive amount of overlap between *vegetalismo*, indigenous *ayahuasca* shamanism, and neo-*ayahuasca* shamanism, I will attempt to disentangle further the social practices between the continuum’s poles.

The primary factor which differentiates urban, peri-urban, and rural/*ribereño* mestizo *ayahuasca* shamanism from those indigenous practices discussed earlier is the focus on individuals. Indeed, individuals from all social classes—the urban poor, working middle class, and business elites—participate in *ayahuasca* healing sessions throughout the Amazon, usually taking place on Friday or Saturday nights<sup>13</sup> (Dobkin de Rios 1970:1419). Likewise, in contrast to indigenous healing sessions where the patients do not usually drink *ayahuasca*, within *vegetalista* practice it is quite common for the ill to drink (Brown 1988:103). However, the motivations behind attending these sessions are mainly ego-based, in that these individuals either hope to be healed, gain success in their businesses, or, perhaps see their futures. As such, when compared with indigenous systems of *ayahuasca* shamanism, the focus on social reproduction is diminished extensively.

As in indigenous shamanism, there are a number of manners in which individuals can become *ayahuasqueros* in the upper Amazon. Often times, individuals who have an illness which cannot be cured by conventional biomedicine look to *ayahuasca* as a cure, either drinking it with

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<sup>13</sup> Many practitioners do much of their healing on Tuesdays and Fridays nights, but devote weekends to group *ayahuasca* sessions.



a shaman or by themselves. While under the influence of the beverage, not only is the individual cured of their illness but they may also see visions or gain powers which push them in the direction of being a healer (Luna 1986:43; Cf. Eliade 2004:110-144). Often an apprentice will receive knowledge in the form of his master's phlegm, which is then ingested. This phlegm contains numerous entities which must be nourished with tobacco in order to control them (Beyer 2009:91).

During my fieldwork, a number of ayahuasqueros I worked with described the same process. On a steamy afternoon in May of 2008, I stopped by a curandero's home in Tarapoto, which also functioned as a consultorio for his ayahuasca enterprise. Following a brief discussion with the shaman, Carlos, in his living room, we decided to move our meeting to his *huerta* (garden). After he showed me the various botanicals growing in his garden, we sat down, situating ourselves in the shade of a large palm. Soon Carlos began to tell me how he came to be a curandero. At the age of fifteen, he had an extreme stomach illness in which he could not eat and was constantly in pain. He visited various doctors in the city of Tarapoto and surrounding area but no one was able to help him. One day, a Shipibo shaman arrived in Tarapoto from Pucallpa to offer healing sessions for a brief, few month period. Having exhausted all medical options locally available to them, Carlos and his father went to visit the traveling healer. The use of healers from outside one's own locale is quite common in the Amazonia, highlighting the importance of alterity in the structure of shamanic healing. However, the Shipibo shaman, after taking his pulse and seeing how advanced his illness was, refused to treat Carlos for fear that he could die.

Dejected, he left the shaman's locale and began walking towards his home, but stopped in front of house just down the block to speak with his father about their options for treatment. After some deliberation, Carlos and his father decided to draw up a contract between themselves and the shaman, in which if Carlos were to have died in the hands of shaman it would not be his responsibility. After seeing the document the shaman happily accepted and immediately began treatment. For a month Carlos first worked with mild, purifying plants, in order to cleanse his body, and he then began utilizing healing plants to aid in curing his stomach problems. After two months, he was allowed to drink ayahuasca for the first time. In another interview one Sunday morning in the backyard of his clinic in Tarapoto, he recounted the following:

After two months, I began to live with ayahuasca. There [with the shaman] I drank the first time, the second, the third, the fourth, but I didn't have any visions at all. In the fifth session, yes, I saw absolutely everything about myself, about the world. I had extremely strong visions. It made me remember when I was a child and the things I did—I cried and asked for forgiveness. What I saw there worked on the physical and mental planes, psychological and spiritual, all of that. I mean, I saw how everything was connected in that session. After that, I rested a good while. For two months I didn't take any plants at all. But after two months of rest, I began another diet<sup>14</sup> with other plants. The plants then began to make me see the path that I should follow to become a curandero. From there, I just began to learn more, more, and more.

Following his work with the Shipibo vegetalista, Carlos began to seek out other teachers from whom he could learn their trade. After a few years of training, Carlos eventually began to offer ayahuasca healing sessions out of his own home, at first only for his friends and family, but after some time, he opened his doors to the rest of the community.

José, an ayahuasquero originally from Yurimaguas, who was now living in Tarapoto, said he had originally learned through his genetic capacity for curing, as some of his extended family

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<sup>14</sup> This instance of *dieta* (to diet) refers to the taking of a single plant over an extended period of time as a means to understand the plant's properties. For more information, see the next section.

had been curanderos. From this he was able to easily connect with the spirits of the plants, as he was a good “receptor,” and slowly built up his knowledge surrounding shamanic practice. Likewise, Eduardo Luna mentions that one of his informants was instructed on how to cure through his interactions with spirits, such as an *izula* ant (*Paraponera clavata*) that spoke a “three-dimensional language” (1986:49). About this, José told me, “In the end, it’s all just knowledge from the cosmos. It’s not in the books; they’re complimentary, they’re someone else’s experience. If you have a good ‘receptor’ and lots of patience, you’ll learn.” Indeed, it was only after he had been working as an ayahuasquero for some time that he began to train under others, visiting an Awajún village in order to learn their style of ayahuasca shamanism.

## **The Dieta**

As noted above, in order to become an ayahuasquero one will usually apprentice under another shaman and train for a number of years, much as one finds in indigenous shamanic “traditions.” During this apprenticeship, the shaman-in-training should develop deep relationships with the various plants he or she will be working with to cure. In order to accomplish this, the apprentice must take each plant repeatedly for an extended period of time, usually alone in a small *tambo* (hut) located in a forest clearing.

As in indigenous shamanism, the individual must observe a strict dieta. The dieta is of utmost importance for the apprentice because it is through the observation of these behavioral restrictions that he is able to make himself “attractive” to the various spirits, or madres, which inhabit the plants. Indeed, the plant spirits are very jealous, especially the mother of ayahuasca and the madre of toé, and only come to those who separate themselves from other humans through their participation in a strict dieta (Gow 1991:239).

All of my informants stressed the importance of the dieta. If one did not follow it not only would they not be receptive to the plants' information and healing powers, they could easily harm or kill an individual (see also Luna 1986:52). During the dieting period, the shaman must abstain from all sexual relations as well as avoid contact with members of the opposite sex, especially menstruating women. Likewise, dietary intake must be restricted in order to make the shaman attractive to the plant spirits (Appendix B). Usually the shaman is allowed to eat only bland foods, such as fish, plantains, rice, and yucca. There are also a large number of foods that are prohibited, including pork, beef, lard, sugar, salt, and alcohol among others (Chaumeil 1979:43; Luna 1986:52). The length of the dieta is directly related to the power of the shaman. For example, among the Jivaro, the longer one is able to observe the restrictions of the dieta, the more powerful he becomes. Only if an apprenticing shaman is able to abstain from sexual intercourse and other restricted activities for five months will he have the ability to either cure or kill. However, to be truly proficient in the shamanic arts one must observe a strict diet for a full year (Harner 1973:20; Chaumeil 1979:43). Luna sees a similar theme among urban mestizo shamans in Iquitos, with the length of the diet determining the amount of knowledge the shaman has as well as his power (Luna 1986:51).

As the shaman works with various plants and observes ritual dietary and physical restrictions, he is able to gain knowledge through his interactions with the plants themselves. Indeed, as was often mentioned by informants, plants, or more specifically plant spirits, teach shamans the various techniques and information necessary to effectively utilize the plant in healing or harming. In the vegetalista practice found in the Peruvian Amazon, it is believed that plant spirits transmit songs, known as *ikaros*, to the shaman. *Ikaros* are magical songs that are

chanted, sung, and whistled, often in Kechwa mixed with Spanish and other languages. These songs have many powers, enabling one to influence reality, and can be used to call upon various spirits to aid the shaman in his work, “conferring agency through particular plants and their mother-spirits” (Barbira-Freedman 2002:145). When harvesting a plant, a shaman may sing the *ikaro* relating to either the plant itself or the infliction that the shaman hopes to cure. *Ikaros* are also used to “calm down” spirits in order to utilize them for revealing the source of a patient’s illness and its subsequent removal (Gow 1994:95). Likewise, during the *ayahuasca* session, *ikaros* are sung in order to control the experience, bringing forth visions or calming down individuals.

### **Mestizo health and healing beliefs**

Within “traditional” mestizo epidemiology, illness has a variety of vectors. The health beliefs associated with Amazonian mestizo culture are a syncretic blend of Spanish colonial era medical ideas, indigenous notions of sickness, and occidental biomedicine. Since the colonial period, there has been much cultural feedback between indigenous and mestizo communities, and as such, many of the illness causing agents are similar between them. When the Spanish arrived in western Amazonia they brought with them immense cultural packages which were disseminated throughout the region by force. The Greek notion of humors, related to a balance of temperaments within the body, was quickly integrated into the health ideologies of local peoples (Ponce 1975:19). Here an imbalance of temperature, such as too much heat or cold entering the body, is thought to cause a person to fall ill. With this agent of illness as well as most of the others, children are extremely susceptible to its effects and as such must be well protected.

Another form of illness is known as *mal de gente* (“the evil of humans”) or *mal del Diablo* (“the evil of demons”), which, as the names imply, refers to one being bewitched by

another, either a human or a demon (Gow 1994:94; Ponce 1975:94-5). The way in which this agent infects can take many shapes. Within *mal de gente*, a victim is infected via the transmission of *virotas* (spirit darts) from another shaman. A *curandero*, under the influence of *ayahuasca*, utilizes the altered state of consciousness to divine the identity of the individual who has bewitched the patient. With this information, the shaman is able to extract the dart, sucking (*chupando*) it out of the patient's body, and initiate a counter-attack against the rival. Similarly, *mal de diablo* entails the same process, but under the agency of a demon, and is thought to be much more dangerous (Ponce 1975:95).

*Mal de aire* ("evil wind") is yet another form of illness found throughout western Amazonia (Ponce 1975:104). The sources of this illness are various jungle spirits (*K. supayruna*, *S. malignos*), such as the *tunchi*, an evil lost soul which roams jungle paths at night until it collides with a passing individual, infecting him or her with an invisible illness (Kamppinen 1989:79). As with other illnesses, children are quite susceptible to the effects of *mal de aire*. Indeed, Beyer notes that infected adults are highly contagious and often times infect own their children, especially babies, when they arrive home (2009:328). However, further blurring the distinction between mestizo and indigenous belief systems, we also see that these themes are found within indigenous communities. For instance, among the Shawi, *ihuan huaya* (evil wind) attacks newborn babies with ease. As such during the first three months of the child's life, the father should enter the home through the "woman's door" after returning home from hunting in the jungle, blowing tobacco smoke as he enters (Fuentes 1988:170). The main symptoms of *mal de aire* are similar to those of *susto*, such as diarrhea and vomiting. The only way to cure an

individual infected with mal de aire is to visit a curandero for treatment, often times involving a *baño de florecimiento* (floral bath) (Beyer 2009:329; Kamppinen 1989:81).

Like mal de aire, *mal de agua* (evil from water) and *mal de monte* (evil from the jungle) are caused by proximity to the pathogens, in this case those residing in the rivers and inner forest. Mal de agua is caused by interacting with the *bufeo colorado* (pink river dolphin, *Inia geoffrensis*) or the anaconda (*Eunectes* spp.), two animals held with high regard within Amazonian culture for their powers. By touching the physical or spiritual forms of these animals, individuals can easily become sick and must be cured by visiting a shaman (Kamppinen 1989:82; Ponce 1975:106). Mal de monte is nowhere near as dangerous, and usually refers to insect bites and other animal inflicted ailments which one encounters while working in the jungle, and are usually cured at home (Kamppinen 1989:85).

Susto is an extremely common form of illness throughout Amazonia. Also known as *manchari*<sup>15</sup>, from the Kechwa verb *manchana* (to be afraid), susto is a generalized illness in which an individual is overwhelmingly frightened by something, usually a *supay* (jungle demon) (Barbira-Friedman 2002:149; Gow 1994:94). When this happens, the extreme shock causes the frightened person's soul to leave that individual's body. The soulless body is then weakened because of its imbalance with the environment, and falls ill (Ponce 1975:83). Among adults the symptoms include a general weakness, a loss of appetite, and depression, while children usually have symptoms such as vomiting and diarrhea (Beyer 2009:327). When one falls ill with susto they must visit a shaman, who will then enter into an altered state of consciousness to travel into the spirit world to retrieve the individual's lost soul.

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<sup>15</sup> Also known as *mal de espanto*, *mantzaque*, *patza*, *pachachari*, and *agarrado de la tierra* (Ponce 1975:81)

Finally, biomedicine finds its way into mestizo health ideology through the illness known as *mal de Dios* or *enfermedades de Dios* (illness caused by God). This category comprises a variety of everyday ailments—flu, diarrhea, fever, vomiting—that are categorized as “smooth” or natural illnesses which come on slowly. While the actual pathogenic quality of these illnesses is not explicit, they are generally believed to be caused by the individual’s environment. Mal de Dios is usually easily cured through the use of antibiotic pills or injections provided to the patient, usually at a pharmacy although some shamans also provide such treatments themselves (Kamppinen 1989:74-5; see also Greene 1998).

One examines all the various options available to them when choosing a method of treatment for any of the illnesses described above. This takes place through “group therapy management,” in which the various kin and affines associated with the ill person decide upon their route of treatment (Janzen 1978:3). Often individuals, depending on the severity of the illness, will self-medicate through the myriad plant and animal products available from their home garden or chakra. Likewise, if traditional remedies do not help, they may attempt to use biomedicine available at a pharmacy, with more serious issues require a visit to a doctor. However, if these methods fail or the illness is of a spiritual nature, individuals will then turn to a shaman or curandero to cure them. Likewise, access to capital defines many treatment options, as the best clinics are privately run and costly, forcing those living on the margins of Amazonian society to fend for themselves.

## **Vegetalismo**

The structure of mestizo shamanic practice is varied although there are some commonalities, such as the focus on individual healing rather than social balance, the inclusion



of deep references to Catholicism, as well as being based within an urban rather than rural environment. Many urban shamans have clinics, called *consultorios*, usually located in their homes although sometimes they also have a storefront or other building which they use. During the day, these individuals offer a variety of services to their clientele, such as massages or general healing, although this time period is usually reserved for consultations. During a consultation, the shaman will talk with the prospective patient to try to understand what problems he or she may have. They will often take their pulse as a means to reassure the patient and “diagnose” their general level of health. Depending on the seriousness of the illness or problem, the shaman may prescribe a simple herbal remedy which the patient can take in their home.

The ayahuasca sessions usually follow a fairly normalized structure. First, the shaman who will be directing the session will meet with the various patients and clients. During this brief conversation, the shaman will attempt to find out why the person wants to drink and what their expectations are of the experience. After these conversations, the shaman will set up his workspace on the ground in the center of the ceremonial area—usually either in a darkened room or a *maloca* located outside of town. This space acts as a temporary *mesa*<sup>16</sup> for the shaman’s tools, usually consisting of numerous *mapacho* (*Nicotiana rustica*) cigarettes, a *shacapa* leaf rattle (*Pariana sp.*), small bowls, and bottles of ayahuasca and perfume. Walking around the room, the shaman will cover the individuals’ heads and upper body in perfume, either *agua de florida* or *camalonga* (Beyer 2009:126). This is explained as a means to make the participants appear more attractive to the mother of ayahuasca as well as protect those within the session.

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<sup>16</sup> A table or mat used by shamans where they place their ritual objects. See Joralemon and Sharon (1993) for an excellent overview of mesa use among North Coast shamans in Peru.

Depending on the shaman, he may sing an ikaro to the bottle of ayahuasca, while blowing smoke from the mapacho cigarette into the bottle's neck, mixing its essence with the ayahuasca. Others begin by pouring the ayahuasca into one of the small bowls first, while chanting an ikaro and blowing tobacco smoke over the beverage's surface. The use of tobacco smoke is quite important in this process. Barbira-Freedman views tobacco smoke as being the closest substance to "soul matter," arguing that in Amazonian shamanism smoke is used to "cross, dissolve, and re-draw boundaries between humans and the cosmos" (2002:136). As such, the "blessing" of the ayahuasca with tobacco smoke effectively opens up the various channels between the mundane reality and the entheogenic reality as experienced during the ayahuasca intoxication, marking the liminality between the two.

Once these boundaries have been dissolved, the shaman will then begin to serve the ayahuasca, working around the room. He will often tell the individual drinking to think of what they want to accomplish or see during this particular ayahuasca session. As the participants drink down their individual cups of the noxious brown fluid, the shaman will quietly converse for a few minutes or perhaps give a short discourse in relation to the session. The shaman himself drinks last so that he will be in control during the session while also ensuring that the ayahuasca intoxication will arrive for all participants at roughly the same time (Dobkin de Rios 1973). Once everyone is settled, approximately twenty minutes after drinking, the shaman will begin to check to see if the individuals are *mareados* (intoxicated/dizzy). As the intoxication takes hold for both the curandero and the clients, the shaman will begin to chant ikaros, guiding the production of the participants' visual hallucinations that are characteristic of ayahuasca (Dobkin de Rios & Katz 1975). With the ikaros the shaman is able to control the movement and energy of the

session, calming individuals down or whipping up ecstatic visions. If the shaman has a patient to treat, it is during this time that he will begin working.

As the shaman is now *bien mareado* (very intoxicated), he can easily access the realms necessary to cure. Depending on the illness presented, the ayahuasquero will usually begin by rubbing perfume on the patient's body. He will then sing *ikaros* related to the illness at hand. As he sings, he will beat his *shacapa*—percussive instrument, like a rattle, which is constructed of *Chambira* palm leaves bound together. The action of the instrument, a steady rhythm which reverberates through the ceremonial structure, aids in the healing process. Beyer notes that the *shacapa*'s movement (*shacapar*) may “blow away the sickness with its breeze,” close up the body to outside attack, or bring on visions (Beyer 2009:77). Following this he will then blow (*soplar*) tobacco smoke over the areas in which he believes the pathogenic agent may lie, “softening” the patient's body with the curls of smoke (Barbira-Freedman 2002:155). Upon locating the pathogen—usually a “spirit dart” or small animal—the shaman will then *chupar* (suck) the afflicted area loudly. Following the removal of the pathogenic agent, the shaman will then produce a quantity of phlegm in which the agent will be found, spitting it aside, or sending the dart or animal back to the sender as a form of spiritual warfare. Once this completed, the *curandero* will again blow smoke over the area as a means to add further protection. These three pieces—*soplando*, *chupando* and *shacapando*—form the basis of shamanic curing, both in indigenous as well as mestizo practices.

As the session progresses, the ayahuasquero will continue to check on the *mareación* (intoxication/dizziness) levels of the participants. As the waves of tryptamine-induced hallucinations arrive, the shaman will sing his *ikaros*, *soplar* tobacco smoke, and put perfume on

the individuals' bodies. After approximately four hours, most of those who have drunk begin to return to a somewhat baseline level of consciousness. It is during this period that the shaman will often ask what the participants have experienced during the sessions. If a person has had a very strong vision or experience, the shaman will usually attempt to interpret it within the structure of mestizo or indigenous cosmology. As the participants return to their normal realities, the shaman may prescribe further treatments, such as a *limpieza* or *baño de floracimiento*, to be completed at a future date. Depending on their levels of intoxication, the patients or participants may stay at the ritual site for an extended period, perhaps overnight, or return to their homes to rest.

## **Conclusion**

As shown throughout this chapter, the focus of mestizo shamanism or *vegetalismo* is on individual bodies rather than a collective social and environmental balance as is found with indigenous shamanic practices. This distinction is quite important. With the immense amount of cultural overlap between mestizo and indigenous shamanism, it becomes ever increasingly difficult to separate the two. However, with the distinction between individually-driven versus socially-driven practices we can begin to see the intrinsic differences between them. As shown with indigenous shamanism in chapter two, even when an individual is ill and needs to be healed, this healing is placed within a larger social context related to an imbalance of cosmic energy. However, within *vegetalismo*, while certain social ills may be cured—e.g. alcoholism or adultery—the curing ritual itself is focused on the individual rather than the greater good of the larger community. This difference is important to disentangle for it allows us to see a continuum of practices based upon the perceived social nature of these practices.

## **Chapter 3**

### **Ayahuasca Tourism**

#### **Historical Topography of Ayahuasca Tourism**

Glossed as “drug tourism” by some authors, a complex multinational phenomenon involving a psychoactive plant beverage has emerged over the past sixty years from the depths of the Amazon rainforest (Dobkin de Rios 1994; Dobkin de Rios & Rumrill 2008). Each year, more and more tourists arrive in South American countries such as Peru, Ecuador, Colombia and Brazil to partake in this plant concoction.<sup>17</sup> The beverage, known by a number of different names, is purported by those that ingest it to aid in the location of missing objects, the divination of future happenings, ensuring good hunting, healing, and to even enable telepathic communication and clairvoyance. Ayahuasca has had a place within both the indigenous and mestizo pharmacopeias and social realities for centuries. Following the 16<sup>th</sup> century colonial encounter in Amazonia and the subsequent establishment of various missions and small Spanish communities, the psychedelic concoction soon entered into the ‘foreign’ consciousness, piquing the interest of many. As mestizo culture developed in these communities, ayahuasca and its associated psycho-spiritual practices blossomed alongside.

Much like Max Weber’s (2010:107) “illumination of the way in which ‘ideas’ become general effective in history,” in this section I attempt to follow the emergence and subsequent embedding of the idea of ayahuasca shamanism in the Occidental consciousness, demonstrating how it gave rise to the contemporary tourism trend. Indeed, we can trace ayahuasca tourism back

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<sup>17</sup> Recently, a number of lodges offering the beverage have opened outside of the traditional zone of ayahuasca usage, such as the Guaria de Osa in Costa Rica.

through time, cataloguing the various tropes and figures that ultimately created the phenomenon we observe today.

While there are passing references to ayahuasca use in early Spanish texts (see Maroni 1737; Mignin 1740), it is not until the publication of *Geografía de la República del Ecuador* by Manuel Villavicencio in 1858 that we get a detailed description of its use. He writes that the ayahuasca “brebaje” is often drunk by the indigenous peoples, such as the Zaparos, for divination, to prepare for war, for curing illnesses, as well as for finding love. He notes that this “narcotic” beverage enables the production of “strange phenomena,” and follows with a description of the ayahuasca experience:

Its action appears to excite the nervous system; all of the senses come alive and all the faculties wake up; they feel vertigo and like their head is spinning, then a sensation of lifting into the air and an aerial voyage; in the first moments the possessed begin to see the most delicious images, conforming to his ideas and knowledge: the savages say that they see delicious lakes, forests covered with fruits, beautiful birds that communicate to them the agreeable and favorable things that they want to know, and other beautiful things related to the savage life. (1984:372)<sup>18</sup>

Villavicencio notes that while the “savages” will often drink for pleasure, they must be surrounded by a number of strong men in order to force them into their hammocks, for they go crazy and will attempt to grab any sort of weapon (1984:373). While Villavicencio presents a distorted view of ayahuasca use among indigenous peoples of Amazonia, this early perspective is still quite valuable, providing us with information regarding the presence and practice of shamanism in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century.

As noted in chapter one, the famed botanist, Richard Spruce, writing in his journal as he traveled throughout the Amazon basin from 1852 to 1857, was the first to accurately describe

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<sup>18</sup> My translation

and identify the primary plant used in the ayahuasca brew, although his work went unpublished until 1873 and was not fully expounded upon until 1908 (Spruce 1873; Spruce & Wallace 1908). Spruce, aside from naming the plant, also described the various preparations leading up to drinking as well as the stupor induced by the psychoactive beverage. His descriptions are rich, providing us with a glimpse into the intrinsic cosmological ritual activities of the peoples of the Amazon. Spruce also astutely notes that the use of tobacco is critical within ayahuasca shamanism, writing that it is the “prime ingredient in the medicine of the payés<sup>19</sup>” (Spruce & Wallace 1908:435). Spruce provides a description very similar to that of Villavicencio:

All who have partaken of it feel first vertigo; then as if they rose up into the air and were floating about. The Indians say they see beautiful lakes, woods laden with fruit, birds of brilliant plumage, etc. Soon the scene changes; they see savage beasts preparing to seize them; they can no longer hold themselves up, but fall to the ground... If he be a medicine man who has taken it, when he has slept off the fumes he recalls all he saw in his trance, and thereupon deduces the prophecy, divination, or what not required of him. (Spruce & Wallace 1908:424)

These few common themes—floating or flying, beautiful visions of faraway lands or peoples, and divination—soon became entangled in the emerging Spiritualist culture, being associated with ideas such as telepathy and clairvoyance.

Perhaps the earliest writing explicitly linking telepathy with ayahuasca can be found in Rafael Zerda-Bayon’s “Informe del jefe de la expedición científica del año 1905 á 1906.” In this short piece, Zerda-Bayon—a renowned chemist in Colombia during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century—presents his findings from an expedition undertaken along the Caquetá and Putamayo rivers, specifically in regard to ayahuasca. His descriptions of indigenous experiences echo those of

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<sup>19</sup> Payé is the Desana term for shaman

both Spruce and Villavicencio. Indeed, he writes that all the individuals from various groups he spoke with gave him the same basic description:

They see everything colored blue; they go crazy until the point that they believe there are tigers, tapirs, snakes, etc... They can see hidden things, hear invisible music; describe, in their own way, cities, houses, towers, white people by the thousands, savages that have never left the jungle and therefore know nothing of all that surrounds us. (Zerda-Bayon 1906:295)<sup>20</sup>

While his account of the ayahuasca experience is much those from earlier periods, it is the next section that is surprising. Zerda-Bayon recounts drinking an extract of the ayahuasca vine with Colonel Custodio Morales from the Colombian military. In a vision during this experience, the colonel saw his father pass away and his sister fall gravely ill. Later, he received information that both of these events had indeed taken place without him being able to know beforehand. Because of these types of experiences, such as seeing faraway lands or events before they happen, Zerda-Bayon named the extract *telepatina bruta* (crude telepathine) (1906:294, 296).

Following Zerda-Bayon's work, information regarding ayahuasca began to circulate more rapidly. In 1923 Fischer Cardenas, another Colombian chemist, was the first to successfully isolate an alkaloid from *Banisteriopsis caapi*. In his doctoral dissertation he names the alkaloid telepatina as homage to his friend and colleague, the late Zerda-Bayón (Cardenas 1923).

Although the chemical was later found to be harmine, previously isolated from the Syrian rue plant, the idea of ayahuasca's association with telepathy grew. Indeed, information about this connection soon appeared in scientific journals and trade magazines throughout Europe and the Americas. For example, Alexandre Rouhier (1924) in his article "Le yajé: plante télépathique," draws upon the work of Zerda-Bayon and Fischer Cardenas, among others, in his exposition on

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<sup>20</sup> My translation



the purported telepathic properties of ayahuasca. He, like others, saw the medicinal, scientific, and visionary potential of ayahuasca, noting that there is “no lack of interest” in the French community (Rouhier 1924:346). With further research, Rouhier believed that the secrets of ayahuasca could be unlocked for the benefit of humanity.

Knowledge surrounding the use of ayahuasca continued to disseminate around the globe with the 1924 publication of Louis Lewin’s *Phantastica*, an important ethnobotanical and pharmacological text. Lewin was originally interested in peyote (*Lophophora williamsi* [Lem.] J.Coult) research and its consciousness altering properties (Lewin 1894). After much study, he expanded his scope and began to study all the varieties of naturally occurring intoxicants. Lewin devotes a lengthy section to entheogens, calling them *phantastica*, an allusion to their hallucinogenic effects. Within this section he presents a broad overview of ayahuasca and ayahuasca shamanism, referring to the plant itself variously as *yahi*, *yagé*, or *yaje*. He writes of the importance of the purgative aspects of the beverage, noting that vomiting “is desirable and to a certain degree necessary” in order to prepare the drinker for the impending psychedelic experience (Lewin 1931:142). Lewin provides us with an “ayahuasca tourist’s” report on his experience:

After having drank the beverage another traveller saw beautiful landscapes, towns, towers, and parks, and even wild animals against which he defended himself. This was succeeded by a feeling of sleep. A third case of experimental self-application resulted in the seeing of brilliant circles of light, many-colored butterflies, and the feeling of a duplication of the personality. (Lewin 1931:143)

Although not translated from Lewin’s native German into English until 1931, *Phantastica* provided a base for much of the later information emanating from the scholarly and semi-scholarly world.

Holmes (1927), in his “Note on yagé,” writes about his personal investigations into the supposed “clairvoyant and telepathic phenomena” experienced while under the influence of ayahuasca. After having a chemist prepare an extract of the plant, Holmes attempted to pass it on to Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, Sir Oliver Lodge, and W.F. Barrett. While both Lodge and Doyle turned down the drug, Holmes never experienced any of the reported telepathic effects. However, he was still positive about the future of the plant. Holmes questioned whether his experience lacked the wanted effects due to not having a “natural tendency in that direction, stimulated by the action of the drug,” and hoped for the future discovery of medicinal properties (Holmes 1927:112).

With the 1929 publication “The ayahuasca and jagé cults” by MacDonald Critchley we see another important piece of ayahuasca literature. Critchley provides the early components that set the stage for the later New Age integration of ayahuasca shamanism. In Critchley’s important text, he describes the intoxication produced by ayahuasca, and at the same time adds into the image of ayahuasca shamanism that has been constructed in the western consciousness. He writes that the chief use of ayahuasca is telepathy, which allows the indigenous peoples to communicate with one another through their minds. Critchley also contended that ayahuasca allowed the indigenous peoples remote viewing capabilities. This gave them the ability to provide “remarkable description[s] of European cities and dwellings—facts concerning which [they] cannot have had any previous knowledge” (Critchley 1929:222). This description echoes all the earlier ayahuasca writings, and seems to be a fairly common trope during early research involving ayahuasca.

In the 1930s, the plant based concoction ayahuasca truly entered into the mainstream psyche, escaping the botanist's side notes and into popular media. In 1932, *Modern Mechanics and Inventions* magazine published a short blurb about ayahuasca with the descriptive title "Drugs said to cause clairvoyance." The piece read as follows:

A South American plant called Yage is believed by natives to have the magical property of enabling the drinker to see great distances or through obstacles. Before the drinker falls asleep everything seems to be filled with hazy bluish rings. As the stupor deepens the sleeper sees vivid visions of things or people known to be somewhere else. This is the reason the drug is supposed to cause clairvoyance. (Modern Mechanics and Inventions 1932)

Likewise, a longer, more in depth article appeared in *The Science News-Letter*, titled "Indian Plant Said to Cause Movie Like Visions." The article reports on specimens of ayahuasca being received by the U.S. National Museum, sent by Guillermo Klug, an individual living in Iquitos at the time. It states that the "drug" made from the plant has the capacity to produce "magnificent and terrifying visions in motion picture form" and perhaps the "power of developing psychic faculties" (The Science News-Letter 1932:257). These characterizations appearing in slightly more popular scientific magazines certainly influenced later perceptions of ayahuasca, especially in regard to the purported telepathic capabilities.

As ayahuasca related information continued to trickle out into the public, elsewhere important developments were taking place. Albert Hofmann, a Swiss chemist, was working at Sandoz Laboratories on April 16<sup>th</sup>, 1943, re-synthesizing the twenty-fifth derivative of lysergic acid diethylamide he had originally created in 1938. While purifying the sample, he was suddenly struck by "odd sensations." He wrote in a report to a colleague that during this experience he saw an "uninterrupted stream of fantastic pictures, extraordinary shapes with intense, kaleidoscopic play of colors" (Hofmann 1980:15). Following this accidental discovery

of a potent hallucinogen, Hofmann returned to his lab on the 19<sup>th</sup> of April and took what he believed to be a minimal dose—250 mcg.<sup>21</sup> As the intoxication took hold, he asked his assistant to accompany him home by bicycle as the effects of the LSD were overwhelming. Indeed, in his notebook he simply wrote “Home by bicycle. From 18:00 – ca. 20:00 most severe crisis” (Hofmann 1980:16). Although Hofmann’s experience was “terrifying” and “demonic,” the drug quickly went through animal and human studies before being released for psychiatric use. Soon however, LSD left the lab and entered the streets, becoming a recreational drug for many and the catalyst for the psychedelic revolution.

During the 1950s, the psychedelic culture continued to grow. Aldous Huxley published his short text *Doors of Perception* in 1954. This book describes his experiment with the phenethylamine hallucinogen mescaline in May of 1953 and recounts the ecstatic experience in great detail. As Huxley gets lost in thoughts about flowers, his attention is turned to his bookcase. He writes:

Like the flowers, they glowed, when I looked at them, with brighter colors, a profounder significance. Red books, like rubies; emerald books; books bound in white jade; books of agate... whose color was so intense, so intrinsically meaningful, that they seemed to be on the point of leaving the shelves to thrust themselves more insistently on my attention. (Huxley 1954:19)

Huxley’s prose was highly influential, jumpstarting the deep Western interest in psychedelic states that exploded in the 1960s. Indeed, this text as well as its 1956 follow-up *Heaven and Hell*, have come to be regarded as psychedelic classics, being read by multiple generations of entheogenic explorers, psychedelic enthusiasts, and researchers.

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<sup>21</sup> The average dose of LSD is ~100 mcg, while threshold effects can be felt as low as 20 mcg

Perhaps one of the most important pieces to link together both entheogenic agents and shamanism in the western mind was the publication in *Life* magazine of R. Gordon Wasson's experiences with *Psilocybin spp.* mushrooms in Mexico (Wasson 1957). Published under the title, "Seeking the Magic Mushroom," Wasson presented his experiences taking the mushrooms with his wife, Valentina Pavlovna, and the *curandera* María Sabina. This article painted a fascinating picture of the Mazatec living in the Mexican village of Huatla de Jiménez. Following its publication, interest in psychedelics and shamanism began to grow exponentially, with many individuals traveling to Huatla to participate in the mushroom ceremonies. Today in villages such as Huatla and San José del Pacífico, much of the local economy is based around this form of tourism, a trend very similar to certain areas of Peru dominated by ayahuasca tourism.<sup>22</sup>

Interestingly, while Wasson was searching for "magic mushrooms" in Mexico, beginning in 1953 William S. Burroughs was traveling through South America, on the advice of Richard Evans Schultes in search yagé. During his adventures, he would correspond with Allen Ginsberg through the post, the result of which was published in 1963 as the *The Yage Letters*. The letters describe Burroughs' difficult journey to obtain yage in the hopes of experiencing its purported powers. After being conned by various "medicine men," Burroughs at long last obtained the vine although he was unable to prepare it himself. After finally experiencing the drink, he remarks that "yage is space travel" (Burroughs and Ginsberg 2006:50). Ginsberg follows up with his own experiences in 1960 in the Amazonian city of Pucallpa, located in the Department of Ucayali. After paying 35 soles (approximately \$1.26 USD) to drink with a mestizo shaman from San

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<sup>22</sup> For example, the Shipibo village of San Francisco, not far from Yarina, is renowned for its ayahuasca tourism practice. Indeed, according to Stuart, at the entrance to the village there is a sign which reads "Centro Ceremonial del Ayahuasca" (2002:37).

Martín, he had an experience of which he wrote that “the whole fucking Cosmos broke loose around” him (2006:60).

In the 1960s, psychedelic culture enters the mainstream, becoming a prominent facet of American life. Timothy Leary contributed much research with regard to psilocin and LSD, ultimately aiding in the distribution of entheogenic information to an entire generation of individuals. Likewise, The Merry Pranksters, a group of counterculture icons, traveled the country in their magic bus in 1964, “turning people on” with a mayonnaise jar full of LSD. As the mid-1960s approach, the hippie movement was in full swing and a true counter-culture had emerged focused upon free love and psychedelic drug use (Adler 1968; Howard 1969). As bands such as the Grateful Dead and Jefferson Airplane played to droves of tripping teens in the Bay Area, the psychedelic culture spread across the landscape. Soon prominent magazines such as *Life* began to publish alarming stories about both the real and, more often than not, fabricated dangers of hallucinogens. As misinformation spread, the Californian government took notice and banned LSD in 1966.

Soon afterward, in 1968, Carlos Castaneda, a Peruvian expat living in the United States, published his master’s thesis, *The Teachings of Don Juan: A Yaqui Way of Knowledge*. This text, combined with the psychedelic social movements of the 1960s, ushered in an era of entheogenic neo-shamanism throughout the world. After claiming to encounter Don Juan, a Yaqui expert in plants, at a gas station in Arizona in 1960, Castaneda is taken on a spiritual and psychedelic odyssey (Castaneda 1998). While highly contested among academics for apparent fabrication, this text and the various sequels to it have been extremely influential in New Age and neo-

shamanic circles (de Mille 1980; Fikes 1993). Indeed, I even saw its heavy influence in the Amazon, where José's wife, also a shaman, looked at the book as a sort of bible for practice.

In 1971, F. Bruce Lamb published *Wizard of the Upper Amazon*, which is the purported true story of the life of a famous healer in Iquitos named Manuel Cordova Rios. Advertising blurbs (Figure 7) proclaim that the book is “an extraordinary document of life in the spirit of Carlos Castaneda's don Juan,” in which the lead figure discovers “astounding psychic resources” in the brain through his use of ayahuasca. According to the book, when Rios was 15 years old he was captured by a group of Amahuaca and initiated into their shamanic arts. After some time, he eventually became a “chief” before escaping back to Iquitos where he practiced his form of ayahuasca shamanism. Much like Castaneda's text, Lamb's book has been heavily criticized and accused of being a fabrication, primarily for many errors in terms of Amahuaca social structure and practice (Carneiro 1980).

Interestingly, not soon after the publication of *Wizard of the Upper Amazon* we can begin to see the emergence of a tourism market surrounding ayahuasca in Amazonia. In an article about an American businessman working in Iquitos, published in the New York Times in 1973, the author presents an overview of the various booms and “minibooms” that had occurred in the area. However, while describing indigenous peoples living in Iquitos, he writes that the “luckier ones have found jobs with oil companies and a few have carved out an economic niche by drawing tourists to séances at which ayahuasca, a mildly hallucinogenic liqueur, is served” (Kandell 1973:3).

In 1971 Terence and Dennis McKenna, following in the footsteps of individuals such as Schultes and Burroughs, set out for the Amazon in an attempt to understand shamanic states of

consciousness and explore new plant hallucinogens. Drawing from this journey, the McKenna brothers published *The Invisible Landscape: Mind, Hallucinogens, and the I-Ching* in 1975, connecting numerous threads which set the stage for the integration of psychedelics, shamanism, and the New Age. Written in an extremely dense, academic style, this text covers a wide range of topics; shamanism, schizophrenia, entheogens, fractal geometry, and the “holographic mind” to name a few.

Following this, Terence McKenna went on to become one of the most prominent figures in the psychedelic movement, writing books and lecturing throughout the Americas. His brother, Dennis McKenna, became a well-known pharmacologist who has conducted a number of studies with ayahuasca. During the later 1980s and early 1990s, Terence became a permanent fixture in the rave scene, often appearing to give ‘raps’ about shamanism, language, and the psychedelic experience. As his popularity grew, so did the connections between the experiences one has under the influence of ayahuasca or DMT and New Age spirituality. Moreover, by linking his experiences to the Amazon and the consumption of ayahuasca, Terence was a main force in the creation of the contemporary ayahuasca tourism market.

Likewise, the popularity of the Grateful Dead following the commercially successful 1987 release of their comeback album *In the Dark* contributed to a massive resurgence in psychedelic culture. During this period, ayahuasca’s prominence continued to rise, becoming the “new, modern, ‘hip’ entheogen of the *cognoscenti*” (Ott 1994:10). Articles about its use are published in a variety of magazines and newspapers, such as National Geographic and the New York Times, and prominent figures such as Sting, Paul McCartney, and Tori Amos all spoke out about their experiences with ayahuasca in the Amazon. In 1995, French anthropologist Jeremy



Narby published his influential text *The Cosmic Serpent: DNA and the Origins of Knowledge*. Working with the Asháninka in the Pichis Valley, Narby argues that the information received during ayahuasca sessions is being transmitted at a molecular level, such as gaining information directly from DNA itself. While shunned by scholars for its many inaccuracies and spurious claims, this text inspired many, including a number of my informants, to make the trip to Amazonia to partake in ayahuasca ceremonies.

As we move into the twenty first century, the amount of information related to ayahuasca grows at an exponential rate. In 2001, Rick Strassman published his text *DMT: The Spirit Molecule*, which examines his journey to obtain permission to perform human research with dimethyltryptamine and the subsequent experiences of his patients. The popularity of this book was such that a documentary was recently produced under the same title and released at Sundance. Many other books followed from a multitude of authors. Daniel Pinchbeck released *Breaking Open the Head* (2002), which follows his engagements with ayahuasca tourism—specifically with the Secoya in Ecuador—and soon sought to exploit a role left open by the death of Terence McKenna in 1999, lecturing at events throughout North America and Europe.

Today, the ayahuasca meme is ubiquitous. In popular magazines such as *Esquire*, *GQ*, *National Geographic*, and others, articles appear with some regularity about its use.<sup>23</sup> Local and national newspapers periodically send journalists to the Amazon to experience ayahuasca first hand and report back to the public. Numerous documentaries have been made examining the use

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<sup>23</sup> Indeed, the number of articles released since I began this thesis is too many to list here.

of ayahuasca from indigenous, mestizo, and occidental perspectives.<sup>24</sup> Television shows as well cannot escape the draw of the ayahuasca meme. Popular programs such as *Celebrity Detox*, *The Dudesons*, *Survivorman*, and others all have episodes which feature individuals traveling to the Amazon to participate in ayahuasca rituals. Likewise, in the third season of the television series *Weeds*, the main character travels to Mexico where her boyfriend, the mayor of a border town, invites her to participate in an ayahuasca session in his home. Music is also heavily influenced by the ayahuasca meme. Groups such as Shpongle, Entheogenic, 1200 Mics and others have utilized not only ayahuasca shamanism related ideas and imagery in their music, but have also sampled ikaros and other Amazonian music, merging it with electronica. As the ayahuasca meme continues to spread, one can only expect that interest in ayahuasca and ayahuasca tourism will increase alongside it.

### **Ayahuasca Tourism Today**

Tourism involving the imbibing of the entheogenic beverage ayahuasca has continually been on the rise since at least the 1950s due to the proliferation of popular and academic information in the occidental ethnosphere. Referred to in the literature as “drug tourism,” “ayahuasca tourism,” or “cross-cultural vegetalismo,” the phenomenon has only recently hit a “boom” status in the upper Amazon, with thousands of tourists arriving in the region to partake in la purga (Dobkin de Rios 1994; Dobkin de Rios and Rumrill 2008; Grunwell 1998; Luna 2003; Proctor 2000; Tupper 2009). The practices and knowledge surrounding the consumption of the drink have become facets of a multi-million dollar enterprise, moving throughout the global ethnosphere, transforming in the process.

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<sup>24</sup> See for example: *L'ayahuasca, Le Serpent et Moi* by Armand Bernadi, *Other Worlds* by Jan Kounen, *Metamorphosis* by Keith Aronitz, *Jungle Trip: Ayahuasca* by Channel 4

While a number of options exist for drinking ayahuasca, such as drinking with a local curandero in a small town or village, many tourists choose to visit all inclusive lodges. Usually located on the outskirts of Amazonian urban centers, such as Iquitos, Pucallpa, Tarapoto, Yurimaguas, and Puerto Maldonado, lodges charge upwards of \$3000 for a one to two week stay. This fee usually includes a number of ayahuasca sessions, seminars, lectures, workshops, as well as general accommodations. In an area of extreme poverty, such as encountered in the region of Alto Amazonas where the average income is around \$76 USD per month, ayahuasca tourism offers an exceptional opportunity for the production of capital. While a number of lodges are owned and operated by local Peruvians, one also sees foreigners entering the local market, purchasing land and setting up their own ayahuasca lodges. Indeed, one of the largest and most successful lodges in Peru, Blue Morphos, located outside of Iquitos, is run by an American. Likewise, in Tarapoto, a Frenchman by the name of Jacques Mabit has combined drug treatment through shamanic practice and ayahuasca tourism in his lodge Takiwasi. Other lodges, such as Centro Situlli and Dos Mundos, both located outside of Tarapoto, are owned by Peruvians but lack the level of success as found with Blue Morphos or Takiwasi.

Many curanderos who have worked in primarily rural areas often vie for a position at an ayahuasca lodge, moving away from their homes to the city in the hopes of gaining material wealth. This creates huge gaps in local traditional health care networks in their home areas. While visiting the small community of Pachillco, located approximately an hour from Tarapoto by motorcycle, I encountered this exact problem. I had gone to the community to try to find a rural ayahuasquero or curandero to interview for my research, as up to this point the vast

majority of my work had been in primarily urban areas. Pushing my rented motorcycle up the steep roads cut into the side of hill, I stopped outside a home to rest for a moment.

As I stood underneath a tree getting some much needed shade, a woman in her early 60s came out of the house and struck up a conversation. We chatted for a bit and very quickly her entire family was outside, offering me chicha and tragos. After a quick drink, I began to ask the family if they knew of any curanderos in the town. The woman replied that there used to be a number of them but over the years they had all moved to the Tarapoto or Lamas to make more money. One of the more prominent healers had moved to Tarapoto earlier that year in order to work at the drug addiction treatment center and ayahuasca lodge Takiwasi. Of course, she could not blame them, as life was difficult and money was necessary, but the lack of traditional healers in the town was detrimental. She told me that now they must walk at least two hours to the nearest larger town, Cachisapa, in order to see any sort of health practitioner. Others I talked to throughout my short stay in Pachilloco told me the exact same story.

Many lodges are advertised on the internet as well as in various travel brochures available in Lima at the Julio Chavez International Airport or at the front desks of myriad hostels throughout Miraflores and Barranco. When examining these advertisements, especially on the internet, certain themes begin to emerge. With names that often utilize Kechwa—such as Mishki Taki (sweet song), Wasiwaska (house vine), Ayahuasca Wasi (ayahuasca house), and Soncco Wasi (house of the heart)—these lodges attempt to draw upon the symbolic, historic, and political power associated with the indigenous peoples of the Americas. This attempt to portray authenticity through indigeneity is also expressed through their descriptions of the shamans that work at the lodges. Often times they will mention that an individual is of indigenous ancestry or

had apprenticed under prominent indigenous shamans. This utilization of indigenous language and aesthetics within the business of ayahuasca tourism is problematic for a number of reasons. Lisa Aldred (2000:330) views such practices as a “fetishization of Native American spirituality,” that “masks” the marginalization of indigenous peoples, which could lead to the dissolution of indigenous spirituality and identity.

Many shamans and lodges within the ayahuasca tourism industry also claim to be able to cure a variety of diseases in their advertisements, e.g. AIDS, cancer, hepatitis, rheumatism, cirrhosis, mental ailments, and many others.<sup>25</sup> Outside of José’s lodge on the Marginal Highway, a large sign overhangs the roadway, offering his numerous services. While many are typical, such as limpiezas and ayahuasca sessions, he also advertises that he can cure any ailment, from AIDS to cancer, with the use of plant diets. Making these claims without any sort of scientific basis to support them is extremely problematic. Indeed, in some ways, one could view this sort of practice as being exploitative of the ill. However, the curanderos who offer these treatments seem to truly believe in their medical efficacy, leading to issues of “traditional” medicine versus biomedicine.

## **Seekers**

Tourists, defined as individuals who have culturally sanctioned leisure time and utilize this time for travel to foreign locales, are of central import (Nash & Smith 1991:17). With thousands of individuals traveling to the Amazon yearly in order to drink ayahuasca and participate in shamanic healing sessions, it is necessary to understand their background and

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<sup>25</sup> While individuals can be charged for being non-licensed medical practitioners under Peruvian law, especially when offering spurious services as described above, such charges are extremely rare.

motivations for turning to the practice. Within ayahuasca tourism, the range of tourists is quite large, with both Peruvian nationals and international visitors participating in the trend. Likewise, while many come to the Amazon specifically to drink ayahuasca, others stumble upon it in their travels, or drink for a diversion. Through a brief examination of ayahuasca tourists drawn from both the literature and my own fieldwork, we will gain a greater understanding of their motivations and styles of tourism.

Neil Whitehead cogently notes that, “shamanism is a burgeoning obsession for the urban middle classes around the globe,” and indeed this seems to be the case in the Peruvian Amazon as well (2004:1). Those that make the venture to the region to partake in ayahuasca shamanism do so having myriad reasons and motivations. Some locate tourists’ motivations as the need to fill an “empty self,” due to loss of connection with the modern world (Dobkin de Rios 1994). Likewise, Stuart (2002) sees the emergence of ayahuasca tourism as coinciding with a perceived loss of religious community in the West.

Michael Winkelman (2005) presents the only published overview of the tourists themselves that participate in ayahuasca tourism. Drawing from a brief ethnographic encounter at an ayahuasca lodge outside of Iquitos, Winkelman examines the reasons behind and perceived benefits of ayahuasca tourism. From interviews with these tourists Winkelman creates a generalized overview of the reasons for turning to ayahuasca tourism; (1) spiritual relations, (2) personal spiritual development, (3) emotional healing, (4) purpose and direction, (5) substance abuse related reasons, (6) scientific knowledge, and (7) hedonism (2005:212). Likewise, the various perceived benefits for the tourists include increased self-awareness, emotional or physical healing, spiritual experiences, and positive changes in life direction. Individuals also

had bad experiences while under the influence of ayahuasca, but afterward viewed them in a positive light (2005:213).

While Winkelman has expounded upon the theme of tourist experience in ayahuasca tourism, his analysis was limited in that it only drew from the experiences of a small number of participants. To supplement Winkleman's work, I have present data obtained through a number of informal interviews conducted in the field. Of those that were more open to my inquiries, the vast majority of tourists I have spoken with couch their reasoning behind three general themes: spirituality, health, and experimentation.

Often times these individuals have experienced some sort of trauma—be it through psychological, physical, or spiritual means that had caused the illness—and travel to the Amazon in the hopes of being cured. One of the first tourists I spoke with, an American named Bill, expressed this need as he explained the reasons behind moving to the Peruvian Amazon and abandoning a successful real estate venture in southern California. At the time he was around 48 years old, a hardened Conservative only interested in the accumulation of capital who once told me his truck had a “Keep honking, I’m reloading” bumper sticker. Having recently moved to Tarapoto with his twenty-year-old daughter and his not much older Peruvian wife, Bill had a fascinating background.

He had been working in the real estate business for a number of years, buying properties throughout southern California hoping to turn a profit. He told me, “I’m sinking all my money into this chicken shit real estate where the owls are screwing the chickens, and everybody is telling me I’m crazy!” In 2003, the market suddenly took off, and he was able to sell some of his assets and gain a few million dollars in the meantime. Being a city councilman as well as a

business man, Bill was required to take drug tests to stay in office. One day when he went to take his drug test, his doctor noticed something strange. After some waiting, his results were back—Hepatitis C and cancer of the liver. The doctors told him that the infection was quite bad and that they did not expect him to live for more than a year. They tried a few different treatments, before settling on what Bill called a "last resort," a combination of interferon and robertol.

He started on the "anti-freeze-like" medicine in the hopes that he could eradicate the Hepatitis-C and resume his life. Unfortunately, after a year, the interferon did not seem to be working. His "counts" jumped to astronomical numbers and his doctors gave Bill only months to live. As he saw the end—all he had worked so long for suddenly taken away from him—he was up for trying any sort of treatment that had the possibility of extending his lifespan, if even for a few months.

One day, a few weeks after he was given his "death sentence" by his doctors, his telephone rang. It was his sister, a "hippie-dippy, new-agey type," who told him that she knew someone who could save his life. Now, Bill, with his ultra-conservative nature, told her that he doubted such a thing could take place but he would listen to what she had to say. She said that she had a friend in Arizona named Blue, who was a shaman and that through his healing practices—and a small fee—Bill could be cured.

His skepticism was high, being that Blue was a "white man" from South Dakota, but he told her he would speak with the rest of his family and get back to her. His parents told him that he should definitely go along with the cure, as he really had nothing to lose. His children felt much the same (Cf. Janzen 1978). So, one day in August, Bill drove to Arizona and met with Blue at a diner on the side of the highway. He told me:



“So I go meet this guy in the desert at this big café at twelve noon, and this guy pulls up in some Willy jeep 1979 or something. He gets out, he’s got long brown hair, a goatee and mustache—he looked just like Jesus Christ—and he’s got this big paisley Owsley multicolored LSD t-shirt on, cut-off shorts, and sandals. He looks like a hippie from the 1970s transported to 2002.”

As they spoke, Bill remained extremely skeptical about the situation. Here was a “die-hard Republican” being told that the only way to health is by following a spiritual path. Blue said that he could certainly cure Bill’s various health problems, but he would have to do everything Blue prescribed without complaint. After some more discussion, Bill agreed to participate in whatever treatments Blue would provide. He started by cutting all meat out of his diet, then turning to completely raw foods. He also did a simple lemon cleanse, followed by work with *uña de gato* (*Uncaria tomentosa*), *chiric sanango* (*Brugmansia grandiflora*), coffee enemas, and an unknown hallucinogen<sup>26</sup> that “looked like white lightning.” After a couple of months, his hepatitis and cirrhosis “counts” fell to low levels. Eventually Bill convinced Blue to give him ayahuasca, which he then continued to take at least twice a week for a year, while also using MDMA and other drugs.

After some time, due to perceived threats from the “medical mafia,” Blue convinced all those within the healing group in Arizona to move to Peru with him where they will set up their own commune outside the city of Tarapoto. They arrived in Lima and began getting to work right away, but Blue had suddenly become distant, locking himself in his hotel room night after night. After a few weeks, Blue was found dead of a cocaine overdose in his room. Without Blue to guide him anymore, Bill decided to continue on with the plan to purchase land in the jungle. After falling in love with a young Peruvian woman in Lima, he moved to Tarapoto with his wife

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<sup>26</sup> Bill posited that perhaps this hallucinogen was 2C-T-7, a phenethylamine compound.

and daughter where they live today. They continue to take ayahuasca on a regular basis, having constructed a cement floored maloca on a plot of land Bill owns outside of town. Often Bill will fly in a shaman from Pucallpa, who he prefers over the local Tarapotino shamans, to conduct ayahuasca ceremonies, paying him around \$500 USD for the weekend as well as purchasing his plane tickets.

While there are a number of positive health benefits associated with ayahuasca consumption, such as its antibacterial and emetic properties, the efficacy of plant medicines such as those taken by Bill in his treatment, both within the states and in Peru, is unknown. Having encountered many individuals like Bill in my journeys—suffering from maladies such as AIDS and cancer—who would tell me that they were cured by their work with plants, especially ayahuasca. However, when I would ask them if they had been tested recently or could provide test results regarding their conditions, I was never able to obtain them.

Other individuals I spoke with expressed their motivations for engaging in ayahuasca tourism within a spiritual context. One evening, I encountered a young 23 year old man named John from Oklahoma drinking in my favorite bar in Tarapoto. After speaking with him for a bit, he informed me that he had only just recently arrived in Tarapoto and was currently looking for a place to stay. As our conversation deepened he began to tell me about what he was doing in Peru. He told me that he had just spent a little over a year living in the Shipibo community of San Francisco, drinking ayahuasca and training to be a curandero. I asked him what had originally inspired him to make the trek to the Amazon, and he replied that he had read Narby's *The Cosmic Serpent* some time back and thoroughly enjoyed it. He also had ample experience with other hallucinogens such as mescaline and LSD, the use of which he said was spiritual. He told

me that his experiences with ayahuasca among the Shipibo had shaped his life more than anything prior, so much so that he now subscribed to an animist cosmology. After the year training in San Francisco, John hoped to purchase land near Tarapoto to start his own healing retreat.

As I walked through the reception area of my hotel as I was leaving one night, I noticed a suitcase near the doors with a book on top of it. Getting nearer, I noticed the book as *Food of the Gods* by Terence McKenna (1992), a text which attempts to tie the origins of language to the consumption of psychedelic mushrooms in the African savannah. The receptionist told me that the book belonged to a woman who was leaving for Lima that evening. After calling up to her room, she agreed to come down and speak with me prior to leaving. Susan, a 46-year-old divorced British woman, had come to Peru some three weeks earlier, to participate in ayahuasca ceremonies at the Centro Situlli in Chazuta. She told me that she needed a spiritual breakthrough. She had experience with psychedelics before but felt as though her life was in a lull at the moment. And indeed, after drinking ayahuasca five times with the shamans at the center, she did have a breakthrough where she saw “everything;” All her familial and affinal connections and her spirit guide. Although she had to leave for Britain the next day, she told me that she was already planning a return trip within the year.

While some individuals, such as those above, couch their interest in ayahuasca tourism on health or spirituality, there are many who are just looking for a new experience. One evening in 2008, I was sitting at the food counter situated in front of a popular *discoteca* (disco) with a

friend, eating *anticuchos* (grilled beef heart). As we were finishing up our plates, a gringo<sup>27</sup> came up to place an order, but was struggling with his Spanish. My friend, noticing the distress on the faces of both the gringo and the woman working the counter, walked over to attempt to alleviate the situation. After a brief discussion, he and the gringo—now carrying his own plate of anticuchos—came back to the table. The gringo, in a thick British accent, introduced himself as Dhanvant. He was traveling through Peru with three other friends and had just arrived in Tarapoto earlier that day. As we talked, he questioned us about the various areas of the jungle we had been to and what to check out.

Eventually the topic of ayahuasca came up when Dhanvant said that he had seen a television program<sup>28</sup> earlier that year about a drink that he could not remember the name of. Before I could get out the word, he says, “You know, I just want to drink some of that fuckin’ shaman juice, brother.” I asked him why and he said that he had eaten *Psilocybe spp* mushrooms on multiple occasions back in London and although some of the experiences were quite difficult he enjoyed them. Now that he was in Amazon, and they had this “shaman juice” that he had seen on television, he too had hoped to try the hallucinogenic beverage. Like most tourists, he would only be staying overnight as he would be heading by Yurimaguas the next day, in order to catch the *lancha* (launch) to Iquitos. I never heard back from Dhanvant, though I am sure he encountered the “shaman juice” he was looking for as he arrived in Iquitos.

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<sup>27</sup> While often times, especially in Mexico, the term gringo is associated with white Americans or Europeans, I have found that in the Amazon the term is stretched to include many foreigners, not simply whites.

<sup>28</sup> The program was episode three of the 2004 series *Extreme Celebrity Detox*. This particular episode featured three celebrities traveling to the Amazon to “enter the spirit world of the Shamans,” to enable the detoxification of their bodies (Channel 4:2010).

Another friend who I accompanied to an ayahuasca session in 2007 also expressed similar experiential motivations. Steve, at the time 23 years old, was a seasoned psychonaut, having had experience with a wide-range of psychedelic chemical—both the most common, such as LSD, and the more obscure, such as 2C-Bromo-Dragonfly, an extremely potent phenethylamine hallucinogen. About two years prior to arriving in the Amazon, Steve, following Ott (1994), experimented with *pharmahuasca*, or pharmaceutical ayahuasca. This is created through the combination of a chemical MAOI and DMT crystal, producing a similar chemical mixture as found in the ayahuasca brew. Now that he was traveling through the jungle, he hoped to try ayahuasca simply to compare and contrast the two novel psychedelic states. Indeed, once Steve had his ayahuasca experience, he immediately interpreted it within the framework of his previous psychedelic voyages, seemingly disconnecting it from any spiritual or local importance.

This brief overview of these three ideal tourist types highlights the variation of individuals' reasoning for indulging in ayahuasca tourism. Some, such as Bill, begin looking for healing power, but then turn towards a more spiritual side. Likewise, John and Susan, rather than looking for a cure, had hoped to be turned on spiritually. Finally, individuals such as Dhanvant and Steve are more focused on the hedonistic aspects of ayahuasca, hoping to experience the entheogenic state rather than its purported healing or spiritual properties.

### **Charlatans and shamans**

In order to better understand the actual practices involved in the phenomenon of ayahuasca tourism, I would like to introduce six separate healers I worked with in the field. These individuals, like the tourists described above, highlight the variation and similarity found within the field of ayahuasca shamanism. Although all of these shamans are located within the

same geographical region (Figure 5), they have very different practices and levels of integration into the tourist market. Many of the healers that participate in contemporary ayahuasca healing sessions, especially those involving tourists, can be classified as neo-ayahuasqueros. In this context, vegetalismo can be seen as a primarily neo-shamanic practice utilized as a “spiritual path for personal development,” that incorporates altered states of consciousness and an indigenous “shamanic” worldview blended with “New Age” values (Wallis 1999:42).

However, in contrast to typical notions of neo-shamanism, which frame the practice as an appropriation of indigenous culture, within neo-ayahuasca shamanism, it is the New Age ideology which is superimposed over indigenous structures. My informants’ practices and relations with tourists all vary, with some not working with tourists at all while others are deep in the spiritual tourism practice. While some are also embedded within a neo-shamanic structure, we also see what some would label as “traditional” mestizo shamans. As such, we can think of the various shamanic practices as being on a continuum or sliding scale from “traditional” to “neo,” with many in between (Figure 8). By briefly examining these shamans, we can begin to tease out their position within this continuum.

Felipe was the first shaman I encountered while working on this particular project, sitting in the shade out front of his consultorio near the main market in Tarapoto. He was the same every time I saw him—slightly overweight with a dress-shirt; always with the top two buttons undone, spectacles resting on the tip of his nose, his scalp showing through his thinning hair. Felipe offered many services at his consultorio, which also doubled as an herb and magic shop, such as curing myriad ailments, conferring luck in business or love, and divination through *naipes* (cards). His store was quite popular, with individuals constantly flowing in and out during

the early morning hours while the market was still busy. Felipe was born in Cajamarca but said he moved to Tarapoto approximately twenty years ago to work as a curandero, having spent more than 30 of his 56 years in the practice. He primarily works with San Pedro cactus and *misha (toé)* although he uses ayahuasca when he feels it is necessary or someone requests it. Likewise, tobacco is a large part of Felipe's practice, smoked as well as in juice form—prepared with camalonga, agua de florida, and trago—which he insufflates during his curing sessions (Cf. Beyer 2009:127).

Felipe's practice was primarily couched in "traditional" mestizo shamanic practices emanating from both Amazonia and the North Coast of Peru. Consultations with Felipe were ten soles, a fee which included taking the client's pulse reportedly as a form of diagnosis and then a brief conversation in which Felipe would offer a course of treatment. Often this treatment included healing products which were imported from Mexico, Colombia, and Venezuela (Figure 9). As his focus was on local peoples, with very little interaction with tourists outside of his plant shop, his integration within the global tourism market was minimal. Moreover, Felipe was extremely protective of his practice, once accusing me of wanting to steal his shamanic knowledge in order to sell it in the United States.

I met Victor through my friend Juan in 2007, at which time he was running ayahuasca and healing sessions out of Juan's home. Born in Santa Maria de Ucayali, Victor said he had learned to cure through training from the age of twelve with his mother's uncle. After living throughout various parts of the Amazon and Andes, he settled in Yurimaguas where he hoped to have success as an ayahuasquero. He offered many services, providing ayahuasca sessions every Tuesday and Friday night while offering *limpiezas* and consultations during the week. While at

this time Victor primarily worked with local—businessman, politicians, and the ill—he yearned for more tourists in his practice. One afternoon he told me, “What’d I’d like you to do is recommend to the tourists—the *gringuitos*—those that work with medicine, to come to me. Of course I want a bit of money, then I will give them sessions in Juan’s backyard.” Although in his ayahuasca preparations Victor only used *Banisteriopsis caapi* and chacruna, he also worked with a number of *cortezas* and other plants. This level of practice situates Victor within the structure of “traditional” mestizo shamanism, although that could be different now.

While initially Victor was distant from the tourism industry, primarily working locals, during a recent visit to Yurimaguas I found that his enterprise had grown exponentially. As I sat in the Plaza de Armas one afternoon in the winter of 2010, flipping through one of the local tourism magazines, I stumbled upon an advertisement for Victor’s new ayahuasca lodge. It seems in the few years since I had met he had begun to work with a prominent local doctor with whom he built his ayahuasca lodge.

Carlos, a 46 year old man from Tarapoto, and his wife Patricia, 23 years old, also from Tarapoto, are both ayahuasca shamans. Like the others, they have a consultorio located within the city limits of Tarapoto near the airport where they provide various services for both tourists and locals. Outside of Tarapoto, some 20 kilometers away on the Rio Cumbaza, Carlos and Patricia have their ceremonial space, with a cement-floored maloca that looks out over the river. At their ayahuasca sessions, usually put on for tourists, they both participate, singing *ikaros* and performing healing rituals. Like the vast majority of other shamans, they use only ayahuasca and chacruna in their brew and stay far away from deliriants like *chiric sanango* and *toé*. While both



Carlos and Patricia offered services for local peoples, their main source of income was through the tourism trade. Their practice will be explored in more detail in the following chapter.

José, at 43 years old, has a prominent practice which serves the entire region between Tarapoto and Yurimaguas. Working out of his house in Tarapoto, which doubles as his consultorio, José has a thriving business. He offers a wide variety of services; reflexology, internal development, music therapy, tai chi, yoga, and of course healing sessions with ayahuasca. Rather than focusing on hallucinations and intoxication, the José concerned himself with the ritual cleansing of the body through purging. While his ayahuasca practice is extremely “traditional,” being drawn from ritual structure of the Achuar, overall José can be thought of as a neo-ayahuasquero, drawing heavily from New Age ideology. During the day, like most other shamans, he works primarily with local peoples. However, the vast majority of his business is focused around tourists. Indeed, José once told me that he sees up to two hundred tourists a month during the high season. As such, José is the most integrated into the tourism market of any of the curanderos I worked with. Like Carlos and Patricia above, José’s work will be explored in further detail in chapter four.

I was introduced to another prominent curandero, Julio, through my good friend Liz, as she lived just down the block from his consultorio—a well-constructed two-story brick building, topped with *calamina* (aluminum roofing), surrounded by palm-thatched huts. Outside of his office sat a brand new pickup with “TOMAR AYAHUASCA ES SALUD”<sup>29</sup> emblazoned across the top of the windshield, the side panels advertising his ayahuasca ceremonies. After I told him I was studying ayahuasca during our first conversation, he was quick to invite me to a ceremony

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<sup>29</sup> “Health is to take ayahuasca,” or, “To take ayahuasca is healthy”

that same night for a price of S/.200 PEN (approximately \$60 USD). Julio was quite well-known throughout the region. During the mornings he would often travel to other areas to heal those who were unable to make the trip to Tarapoto. In the afternoons, Julio offers very low-priced or free healing services to locals from his barrio, prescribing natural remedies for a variety of ailments. He also runs an ayahuasca lodge located on the outskirts of town, a large walled-in compound filled with exotic plants and small tambos. At his lodge, he primarily works with foreign tourists, providing ayahuasca sessions and dietas on a regular basis. According to Julio, he has worked with many different indigenous groups throughout the Amazonian region and has a deep knowledge of ayahuasca shamanism. Julio is deeply integrated into the tourist market, having a website for his lodge as well as numerous connections with tourism agencies.

Of all the individuals I worked with, Julio was the only one that I ever suspected of being a charlatan. He used delirants in his practice, such as toé and chiric sanango, and was quick to offer me ayahuasca without any sort of consultation. However, his reputation with locals was excellent and everyone I talked with spoke very highly of him. Indeed, the term charlatan was never used when speaking of Julio, at least by non-shamans. Among the various curanderos of Tarapoto, there were rumors that he practiced dark shamanism. José once told me that Julio would steal the souls of tourists in order to get more power. He knew this because he had cured a number of individuals who had supposedly drunk ayahuasca with Julio and fell ill afterwards.

This brief overview of shamanic practitioners and their integration within the tourist practice provides us with much interesting information. These six healers all represent varying levels of practice—from more “traditional” ayahuasca shamanism to what I term neo-ayahuasca shamanism. Likewise, their integration in the larger tourism market varies just as much as their

practice. While all are located roughly in the same region, geographically speaking, the levels and styles of practice show much variation.

## **Conclusion**

As shown in this chapter, the structure of ayahuasca tourism is quite complex. Beginning with its scientific discovery, ayahuasca's associated knowledge and practices soon entered into the Western consciousness. Throughout the first part of the century, ideas surrounding telepathy and ayahuasca aided in its dissemination. Indeed, the purported telepathic and psychic properties of ayahuasca overshadowed its spiritual aspects until the late 1930s. With the psychedelic revolution and the flurry of New Age texts from the 1950s on, ayahuasca has since become a permanent fixture in the Occident.

As ayahuasca related flows of information spread throughout the globe, a tourism market focused on the entheogenic beverage emerged in the western Amazon. Here, both lodges catering to tourists as well as individual shamans participate in a multi-million dollar industry, selling ayahuasca sessions to myriad tourists. The tourists themselves have various motivations for engaging in ayahuasca tourism, but seemingly couch their reasoning in experimentation, health, and spirituality. Likewise, the curanderos who lead ayahuasca sessions for tourists do so for a variety of reasons and have varying levels of integration within the tourist market. While ayahuasca tourism continues to grow as a trend, many have been extremely critical of the practice, such as Dobkin de Rios. In the next chapter, I will expound upon ayahuasca tourism further, focusing specifically on the practices of the curanderos that participate within its structure.

## **Chapter 4**

### **(Neo)-Shamanism and the ayahuasca ontology**

The various practitioners associated with ayahuasca tourism, especially those labeled as neo-shamans, have been the target of critical analyses by many authors (see Dobkin de Rios 1994; Dobkin de Rios & Rumrill 2009). While some authors, such as Luna (2003), argue that such ayahuasqueros are usually ‘authentic’ in their practices and attempt to provide legitimate services for tourists, others are not so positive. Marlene Dobkin de Rios has been the most critical of such neo-shamans, utilizing rumors and second-hand knowledge to construct her arguments. Indeed, Dobkin de Rios views neo-shamans as utilizing a “borrowed mysticism” in order to scam tourists and offer services which could possibly place them in harm’s way (Dobkin de Rios & Rumrill 2008:82). Like Dobkin de Rios, I also view neo-ayahuasca shamanic practice as drawing upon a borrowed mysticism in Amazonia; however, the same is true for “traditional” indigenous and mestizo shamanism. This chapter demonstrates how the myriad forms of ayahuasca shamanism fall within a continuum of practices linked to an ontological discourse that structures how one “shamanizes,” based upon the concept of the mimetic copying of the Other (Figure 8).

Mimesis has been defined as “imitation of another person’s words, mannerisms, actions, etc.,” as well as “the deliberate imitation of the behavior of one group of people by another (usually less advantaged) as a factor in social change” (OED 2009). Critical theorist Walter Benjamin, in his 1933 article, “The doctrine of the similar,” notes that mimesis is a product of nature, yet he asserts that humans have the highest capacity for producing similarities (1979:65). He calls this capacity for imitation the “mimetic faculty,” tracing its emergence through history

(1979:68). Benjamin is able to demonstrate the importance of mimesis in cultural production by exploring the realm of astrology, noting that the “reading” of the stars is comparable to the reading one does today, and thus concludes that language itself is “the highest application of the mimetic faculty” (1979:68). In “On the Mimetic Faculty,” Benjamin notes that when compared to the “ancients,” our mimetic capabilities are in decay, with the compulsive tendencies that originally drove man to copy the world outside him slowly drifting away with the emergence of modernity (1978:334).

Theodor Adorno follows Benjamin’s insight, locating the propensity for mimesis in the biology of animals, and proceeds to expand on the idea of a mimetic faculty. For Adorno, when one mimics, it is not simply a one-to-one copy of the original object, but an entirely new artifact based on the mimetic image (Adorno et al. 1997:133). Indeed, this mimetic process is intrinsically linked to alterity, as the “ability to mime... is the capacity to Other” (Taussig 1993:19). The understanding of the creation of the Other as an object has long been a fascination in anthropological circles (see Fabian 2002). However, within the shamanic ontology, alterity is not simply limited to other humans, but all objects outside the local (see Viveiros de Castro 1998). It is through this othering that emerges what Michael Taussig calls the “magic of mimesis”—the creation of an “artifact that portrays something” which gives the creator “power over that which is portrayed,” much like Frazer’s notion of sympathetic magic (1922; Taussig 1993:131). My work supports Taussig’s view that the combination of mimesis and alterity is a “terrifically ambiguous power,” as one has the ability to represent the world while at the same time being able to falsify it, of which questions of authenticity and legitimacy arise.

Chaumeil continues the examination of Amazonia in terms of alterity or othering in his article, “El Otro Salvaje.” The extreme ambiguity associated with alterity simultaneously expresses spatial, sociological, political, and technological distance (Chaumeil 1999:9). Here, we can see that that which is not local is imbued with great, ambivalent power—being both superhuman and powerful while also being subhuman and dangerous. In his examination of alterity, Chaumeil focuses on two images, the Inca and the *Blanco*, which he sees as holding the place of cultural heroes within indigenous Amazonian cultures (1999:19). While the Other as a cultural hero is prominent, Chaumeil views this construction as being integral to social, especially shamanic, practice in the Upper Amazon. Through an examination of the integration of these characters into practice, he is able to highlight the varied shamanic forms present in Amazonia. Chaumeil views the Other as a necessary “source of powers,” which Amazonian individuals integrate as a means to show power over the other (Chaumeil 1999:20, 26).

Ayahwasca shamanism can be thought of as a field—a “field of positions and a field of position-takings”—in which agents interact in the production of a cultural artifact (Bourdieu 1993:34). It is this agential interaction within the larger structural reality that interests Bourdieu, as the field is a “field of forces, but it is also a field of struggles tending to transform or conserve this field of forces” (1993:30). This struggle, both among agents as well as between agency and structure, takes place as either side attempts to impose change within the system or maintain it. However, the field itself is not defined by the agents but instead by the generated practices which emerge in the field. According to Bourdieu, a field requires one to utilize a certain type of habitus in order to be able to interact within its structure (Bourdieu 2000:164). Habitus is directly related to the conditions under which one develops. It can be thought of as a “product of

history,” “structuring structures that function as structuring structures,” which algorithmically produce individual and collective dispositions and practices (Bourdieu 1990:52, 54).

Following the work of Taussig (1993) and Chaumeil (1999), I propose an ontology under which ayahuasca shamanism in the upper Amazon is structured, based upon mimesis and alterity. In this manner, we can think of the field of ayahuasca shamanism itself as being structured upon mimetic acquisition of the Other’s attributes as a source of knowledge, aesthetics, and ultimately power. To enter into this field, one must have certain dispositions—habitus—firmly in place. We can see the emergence of these dispositions through apprenticeship in ayahuasca shamanism, in which individuals spend up to ten years working with various plant medicines, dietando, before they begin working with patients, as well as in the general Amazonian population.

### **Mimesis and Alterity in Ayahuasca Shamanism**

"The plants taught me," he replied, flashing a stilted grin. I chuckled to myself, noting the incongruity of both the question and its subsequent answer. The answer had been uttered hundreds of times by curanderos and shamans throughout the Amazon before, to a wandering reporter or anthropologist. However, today, sitting in my friend's huerta in the large city of Tarapoto, located in the Peruvian Upper Amazon—children laughing and playing in the *colegio* (school) just across the street, his Russian wife in the living room breastfeeding their own 3-month-old baby while chatting on one of the laptops in the living room—the questions are of a different sort. Rather than asking about his knowledge of what is often glossed as "traditional" Amazonian mestizo shamanism, I was asking how one of my informants, José, came to understand the chakra system as used in Hindu traditions.

Across town, I meet with Patricia, another young parent who also happens to be an *ayahuasca* healer. At 23-years-old, she is by far one of the youngest in Tarapoto, furthering her already marginal position when considering the long-held perspectives, probably originating from indigenous Amazonia, that restrict the "shamanic arts" to post-menopausal women (Luna 1986). As we sit and talk, her little boy—just over a year old—looks up at us out of his crib, his huge brown eyes glowing. His mother and I flip through a sketchbook containing various pieces of art produced through her *ayahuasca* experiences. Interestingly, much like my good friend José, Patricia was also attracted to the East. In one of her drawings, Krishna and Buddha sat hand-in-hand, anacondas wrapped around their shoulders, chakra systems ablaze. Asking Patricia where she learned of these deities, she lets out a slight giggle and repeats exactly what José had uttered earlier, "The plants taught me."

Various shamanic techniques and tropes are found among Amazonian peoples who utilize *ayahuasca* in their daily practices. For his part, Jean Pierre Chaumeil notes that a common knowledge of shamanism does not exist and that there are "as many knowledges as there are shamans" (1979:37). While I concur with Chaumeil, I contend that this does not preclude the existence of a cross-cultural ontology which dictates how one should or should not be an *ayahuasca* shaman. While there may be "many knowledges," the ontological discourse of *ayahuasca* shamanism emphasizes the importance of mimesis and alterity as a sort of base structure in which one can situate practice. Indeed, it is this many knowledges, derived from a variety of sources laid upon this ontological structure that Dobkin de Rios argues is composed of a "hodgepodge of cobbled mysticism," that structures shamanic practice. I find Dobkin de Rios's aversion to alterity and the integration of new components into shamanism quite disconcerting, especially when one considers that her earlier text, *Amazon Healer: The Life and Times of an*



*Urban Shaman*, she examines the various outside forces, such as Spiritualism, that heavily influenced her father-in-law Don Hilde's shamanic practice (1992).

In both indigenous and mestizo shamanism, the use of songs called *ikaros* is extremely important (Beyer 2009; Demange 2002; Luna 1984). Knowledge of these songs, as shown in chapters two and three, is usually obtained through hallucinogenic sessions with *ayahuasca*, “copied” during the entheogenic intoxication from plant spirits. Alterity plays a prominent role as the songs are peppered with linguistically foreign components. For example, among the Kukama peoples of the lower Río Huallaga healing songs should be sung in Kukamiria, a dialect emanating from the Río Ucayali where the Kukama originally lived before being forcibly relocated during the rubber boom (Stocks 1981:143). This dialect is unintelligible to Kukama speakers, reinforcing the power of alterity, both temporally and linguistically, in shamanic healing. The Piro of the upper Ucayali utilize foreign or archaic language in their healing songs for the same reason, as do the Urarina of the Chambira basin (Dean 2009; Gow 1991:238). For mestizo peoples, the main language of these songs is Kechwa, emanating from the Andean highlands. However, we also see the presence of various Shipibo and Kukama terms (see Luna 1986). For mestizo shamans, rather than using only Spanish, the *curanderos* in urban areas draw off of the linguistic repertoire of those living far away in the Andean mountains or those Amazonian indigenous communities highly associated with *ayahuasca* shamanism. This presence reinforces the ways in which mimesis and alterity are located within the shamanic ontology, creating power through copied, foreign language, and thus integrating a part of the Other into the shamanic bricolage.

Another aspect of *ayahuasca* shamanism which is deeply linked to mimesis and alterity is the ability to transform one's self into various animals. By copying the “ways of the animals,”

through mimesis, a shaman gains power over them and can thus do as the captured animal does. Among many different indigenous groups throughout the western Amazon it is commonly believed that shamans have the ability to transform into jaguars. In this jaguar spirit form, the shaman plays up all the traits of the lethal cat, attacking humans and other animals. The Matsigenka peoples also utilize mimetic transformation in their shamanic practice. Allen Johnson notes that “the shaman’s spirit can fly to the land of the unseen because ayahuasca enables him to take a form such as that of a kimaro, a game bird” (Johnson 2003:216). While many mestizo shamans told me they could travel spiritually, very few spoke of animal transformations. Indeed, out of all my informants, only two ever spoke of transforming into animals, and they were both from rural areas practicing a very “traditional” form of mestizo shamanism.

Within Amazonian mythology, we can also see the presence of alterity with regard to plant and animal spirits. Gow, expounding on the topic of *madres*, finds that both the *yakuruna*, the “owner of the river” and the *sacharuna*, “the owner of the forest,” are usually described as taking the appearance of a white man (1991:94). We also see animals, such as the *bufeo colorado* (pink river dolphin), being deeply associated with the Other, being able to easily take on the form of a gringo. Indeed, many of the various mythological creatures have this alteric character (see Luna & Amaringo 1999). In my own field work, people often told me similar tales, noting the blue eyes and white skin of the *madres*. In a small Shawi community located in the lower Río Paranapura, we find descriptions of *madres* taking the form of doctors or medics (Fuentes 1988:169). As with other elements found within the shamanic ontology under study, these familiars are constructed through use of mimesis on the Other.

Much like indigenous shamans, urban mestizo practitioners utilize familiars, or spirit helpers, known as *madres*. These entities take many different forms—doctors, princes, Inca *curanderos*, mermaids, etcetera—though a theme common to all permutations is alterity. Luna sees this as a source of power for the mestizo shamans, who had been subjected to many new cultural forms, often in a violent manner. He notes that there exists a “host of spirits with various appearances, depending on the degree of assimilation of foreign influence” (1986:73). This is an interesting observation, as the point of contact between the shaman and the Other helps to define the form of the familiar as a mimetic copy.

Within Amazonian traditions, as shown by Chaumeil (1999), the idea of alterity is important when dealing with both the source of knowledge and the construction of the Other. As Dean notes, “a characteristic common to the shamanic complexes of the region—including the Urarina and Jivaroans—is that power is conceptually derived from sources outside of the group” (Dean 2009:193). Often times, foreign powers are played up as being more powerful or dangerous than local entities. For example, the Awajún view their neighbors, the Shawi, as having extremely powerful shamans (Fuentes 1988:184). The Awajún blame many of the deaths which occur in their communities on Shawi shamans, and this in turn has led to the murder of a number of Shawi *ayahuasqueros*. Similarly, the Achuar/Shiwiar of the Río (river) Corrientes fear urban, mestizo shamans, while the Capanahua of the Río Trapiche fear Kukama shamans (Gow 1994:97). However, this power related to alterity is not simply found outside of the groups, but also within them. For the Llakwax Lamista located in the region of Lamas, Peru, in order for one to become the most powerful shaman, known as a *banku*, the apprentice *ayahuasquero* must “master the rainbow,” encompassing gender differences in order to gain access to the “reproductive power of the cosmos” (Barbira-Friedman 2002:153). Likewise, for mestizo

shamans, Peter Gow notes that “even where a shaman has not learned from such a source, there is a strong ideological assumption that forest Indians are the ultimate source of shamanic knowledge, and that any powers acquired directly from them are of particular value” (1994:96). This knowledge from afar integrated into shamanic practice is also reported by Luna. He posits that the “most powerful shamans are often those that get some secret weapon from a distant group,” which encourages a *bricoleur*-like syncretism in one’s practice (Luna 1984:35).

Ayahuasca shamans also rely on the use of mimetic imagery from the Other in their discursive practice. For example, Janet Siskind, working with the Sharanahua, notes that “in several cases, elements of Peruvian culture appear,” in the local shamanic practice, often times emerging in the visions one sees while under the influence of ayahuasca, or being integrated into the performance of shamanic healing (1973:35). These elements include objects as diverse as airplanes, harmonicas, and accordions, all integrated into the local indigenous practice as power imageries. This indicates the pivotal role of the Other in the construction of shamanic power. Shane Greene’s (1998) work among the Awajún provides us with another excellent example of this phenomenon. As he recounts, as a group of Peruvian doctors began to work within an Awajún community the local shamans simultaneously began to integrate various aspects of the medical team’s practices into their own construction of self (Cf. Krüggeler 1997). They would don necklaces made of syringe caps, rather than the “traditional” jaguar teeth and bird-skull necklaces of the past. After their ayahuasca healing ceremonies, the shamans would often prescribe injections of antibiotics for their patients.

As identities blur through this process of mimetic othering, personal and collective notions of authenticity and legitimacy are also radically altered. This transformation takes place at multiple levels both locally and outside the Amazonian ethnosphere. Influenced by popular

media and non-traditional media, such as blogs, forums and chats, Western peoples have constructed an idea of what shamanism entails and who practices it. This imaginary shamanism plays a prominent role in the construction of shamanic practice and aesthetics. As discourses emanate from the West, these shamans, especially those who work with tourists, both assume and reify the image that is constructed by this imaginary (see Said 1979; Carrier 1995). This in turn creates a feedback loop, as the image of the Other is broadcast to the shamans of Amazonia, which is then integrated and aesthetically donned, only to be re-broadcast to the Other once again.

Let us now return to José and Patricia, whose words I used to open this section. Both of them follow the shamanic ontology under discussion, but to greater extent than classical indigenous and mestizo shamans. According to my criteria, this places them within the ideal type of neo-ayahuasqueros. Some authors, such as Dobkin de Rios, would label them charlatans, arguing that they are using “borrowed mysticism” only as a means to gain money, and that their practice is inauthentic (2008:2). Instead, as I will demonstrate, their practices fall within the ontology of Upper Amazonian ayahuasca shamanism, utilizing a borrowed mysticism only to supplement their practice. The various factors already discussed, such as music, familiars, and distant knowledge, are deeply embedded in neo-ayahuasca shamanic practices, albeit created through a wider aperture of mimesis and alterity than in other forms of so-called “traditional” Amazonian shamanism.

When I first arrived at José’s house, I was slightly taken aback by the level of his syncretic practice, largely due to my limited understanding of Amazonian shamanism. Outside of his small 2-bedroom home located in a barrio in the city of Tarapoto a sign was placed in the

front yard describing the various therapeutic services he offered (Figure 10). These include such practices as Reiki, music therapy, as well as reflexology, all of which are Western practices. As we talked, he spoke openly about his procurement of these foreign practices. Although he stated that he had learned of them from the plants, after some time he noted that he “had read a few things here and there,” but it was the use of ayahuasca, and subsequent visual and mental phenomena, which enabled him to utilize them. Here once again we can see the mimetic copying of the Other, in this case from various alternative healers. However, his understanding of the actual practices was somewhat partial, resulting in a form of simulation (Baudrillard 2001:169).

The use of myriad mimetically copied images in the practices of both José and Patricia is more pronounced than that found in indigenous or traditional mestizo shamanism. Rather than primarily drawing off of Catholicism, as mestizo ayahuasqueros are known for, the two shamans under study are inspired by diverse systems such as Buddhism, Hinduism, as well as the iconography of Aztec, Inca, and Maya peoples. Walking into Patricia’s work area, one immediately notices the plethora of objects sitting on her mesa. These included a number of small figurines—a Ganesh, Buddha, and a small version of the Aztec calendar—as well as various small mementos from tourists, such as an Eiffel Tower keychain and various foreign currencies (Cf. Tambiah 1990:24-28). José’s mesa was much the same, containing many different icons from a number of religions.

The presence of *madres* within the neo-shamanic field is much like that of “traditional” ayahuasca shamanism, though drawing from a far wider breadth of imagery. Speaking with Patricia about her drawings, she began to tell me of the various *madres* and spirits she had encountered during her ayahuasca sessions. At one point, she was speaking about a particular form of the *yakuruna* which often takes the form a mermaid. She flipped through her sketch book

until she finally found the picture that she wanted. When she showed me, I let out a giggle, as the *sirena* (mermaid) had taken the form of Ariel, the main character from the Disney animated film *The Little Mermaid*. Our conversation deepened and she continued to pull out various drawings of *madres* to show me. In another of her pieces, UFOs hovered over her *maloca*, while grey-colored aliens emerged from a beam of light. She explained that these aliens had appeared during one of her first *ayahuasca* sessions, and she was quickly able to integrate them into her spiritual stable. In this example, one can easily see how the neo-shamans draw off a deeper form of alterity, based on contact with foreign entities, and the mimetic faculty.

The presence of *ikaros*, or power songs, in neo-*ayahuasquero* ritual practice is akin to that found in both indigenous and mestizo traditions, utilizing foreign and esoteric language as a means of realizing power. However, in contrast to both of these, the breadth of linguistic utilization in the novel *ayahuasca* phenomenon is much greater. José knew many different *ikaros*, which mainly utilized indigenous languages, including Kechwa and Kukama, while Patricia could sing in both Shipibo-Conibo and Kechwa. While the practice is similar to indigenous and mestizo shamanism, the presence of mimesis and alterity are greater due to increased contact with those outside of the local group.

In summation, a continuum of practices exists within the field of *ayahuasca* shamanism, ranging from indigenous shamanism to neo-shamanism. This continuum of ritual practices is situated within an ontological discourse which is pivotal to the construction and the very constitution of the shamanic power achieved through mimesis and alterity. This ontological construction of the shaman is best thought of as a bricoleur, an amalgamation of the Other created through the process of mimesis. The closer contact one has with foreign sources, the greater amount of mimetic imagery the shaman can draw upon. While many would label the neo-

shamans I have worked as being charlatans, it is obvious through my fieldwork that while there may be many shamans who are simply out for cash, to reduce the neo-shamanic practice to simply monetary terms is problematic and a disservice to the field of ayahuasca shamanism. Rather than simply thinking of these neo-shamans as appropriating another's culture, we must situate them within a continuum, and critically examine how they construct themselves according to the ontological discourse of ayahuasca shamanism in upper Amazonia.



## **Chapter 5**

### **The Problematic and Future of Ayahuasca Tourism**

During the last sixty years, as ayahuasca-related information has entered into the global consciousness, shamanic practice has increasingly become intertwined with tourism, becoming a prominent source of revenue within the region (Dobkin de Rios & Rumrill 2008; Luna 2003). As the forces of globalization act upon ayahuasca shamanism through its associated flows of capital, knowledge, and individuals, we see a number of issues arise. Questions surrounding safety, authentic practice, outside appropriation, social change, and the hyper-commodification of ayahuasca related knowledge and practice move to the forefront. As E. Wanda George points out, the commodification of intangible cultural heritage, such as the case with practices surrounding the use of ayahuasca, often leads to distortion of the “original culture... over which the community has little or no control” (George 2010:381). Although there are many problems and issues surrounding ayahuasca shamanism which challenge its cultural power—many of them stemming directly from tourism practices—I argue that ayahuasca shamanism retains, perhaps strengthens, its importance in Amazonian societies, while at the same time undergoing structural reconfigurations.

#### **Ayahuasca Tourism and Safety**

The risks involved in ayahuasca tourism are many, with the physical and mental health of both the tourists and local peoples being at the top of concerns. To drink ayahuasca is to push oneself to the limit; ingesting an extremely potent psychoactive and purgative puts the body and mind into a state that is quite unfamiliar to an individual who has only experienced normal,

everyday waking consciousness. This extreme state can be easily manipulated by one who knows how, and this in turn can lead to disastrous consequences. Indeed, some commentators suggest that ayahuasca tourism constitutes a “public menace” which needs to be both “evaluated and controlled” due to the risk of personal harm and sexual exploitation, as well as a lack of concern for participants by shamans (Dobkin de Rios & Rumrill 2008:72).

Research undertaken in the 1950s and 1960s throughout the world on the efficacy of psychedelic drugs in psychotherapy provides us with a wealth of information regarding the mental manipulation of the intoxicated. Perhaps the best known hallucinogenic chemical, lysergic acid diethylamide-25 (LSD), was heavily investigated by figures such as Oscar Janiger, Timothy Leary, Stanislov Grof, and others, up until its ban in 1968. While many positive effects of psychedelic chemicals were discovered during this period, there were also a number of problems that arose, such as the link between heavy psychedelic states and suggestibility.

Research by Middlefell (1967) and Sjöberg & Hollister (1965) both demonstrate that individuals, especially those with pre-existing mental conditions, are more suggestible to outside influences while inebriated by psychedelic drugs such as LSD and mescaline, comparable to suggestibility found under hypnosis. However, psilocybin (4-HO-DMT), the chemical cousin of N,N-dimethyltryptamine (DMT), the active hallucinogenic agent in the ayahuasca brew, was found not to increase suggestibility in participants (Sjöberg & Hollister 1965:260). While this may seem to indicate that intoxication with DMT may not increase suggestibility, this research has not been undertaken, and as such, the links to suggestibility with other hallucinogenic agents needs to be taken into consideration.

This psychological susceptibility is sometimes played upon by malevolent curanderos in the upper Amazon. According to the work of Dobkin de Rios & Rumrill there are a number of rumors that point to some individuals who “seduce” young women who are then “discarded after their novelty to the healer has worn off” (2008:12, 82). The shaman is able to do this through the same mechanisms of suggestibility discussed earlier. During ayahuasca sessions, while participants are heavily intoxicated, the shaman speaks to them and provides certain suggestions which in turn cause them to become dependent upon the shaman. Sometimes the woman will move into the shaman’s house, living with him while being given ayahuasca on a regular basis. This in turn creates a self-perpetuating system of dependency and manipulation.

On a short visit to the small town of Barranquita, located on the Cainarachi River, a few hours outside the city of Tarapoto, I encountered a similar discourse based upon rumor. I was there with a colleague whom I was working alongside in the collection of life histories and genetic samples of indigenous peoples living along the Yanayaku River. We had been working all day and had returned to the town a couple of hours earlier to get cleaned up and go over our notes. Eventually, as often happens in Amazonia, we decided to seek cool drinks in the shape of a Peruvian lager. However, beer was non-existent in Barranquita at this time, so we settled on drinking a small bottle of the local liquor, *chuchuhuasha*<sup>30</sup>.

As there is only electrical power between 9 PM and 11 PM each day, we made our way through the darkened community with the aid of headlamps and flashlights, crossing through the *Plaza de Armas*, before arriving at a small house that also functioned as a *bodega* (shop). Here

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<sup>30</sup> Also known as *chuchuhuasi* or *chuchuhuasa*—a plant-based liquor created through the extraction of tannins and alkaloids from the *cortezas* (bark cuttings) of the tree *Maytenus krukovii* which are combined with *aguardiente* (literally “fire water,” cane alcohol)

was our “bar” for the evening, dimly lit by candles with a group of four older men playing cards in the corner. We sat down on the stools surrounding the only other available table and asked for a bottle of our favorite trago. As we sat and drank, we began to talk to the proprietor of the establishment, an older woman in her late 50s, with what appeared to be sad sunken eyes but a cheerful attitude. She began speaking to us about her life, and, as often happens in these situations, the conversation quickly drifted to a tragic story about the loss of one of her sons. As she sobbed, relating the pain of her loss, her other son came up to console her. After a bit, the woman had to tend to the other customers in the “bar,” so her son sat down with our group. Taking a swig of the acrid, tannin-filled beverage, I shifted the conversation to something that perhaps could be a bit more uplifting—ayahuasca shamanism. Unfortunately, I was wrong.

Probing the man’s thoughts on ayahuasca shamanism, and especially of its tourism, he began to relate a story that he had heard from a friend. He spoke of a quite prominent ayahuasca lodge and treatment center in the city of Tarapoto, just an hour and a half away. According to this individual, a young girl, fifteen years of age, had a mental breakdown and was not responding well to any of the biomedical treatments provided by medics in the city. As such, her parents brought her to a curandero at the lodge. The shaman manipulated the family based upon the crisis, asking for more money than certain objects cost, such as *mapacho*, of which he charged fifty soles (~\$16 USD) for a bundle, which usually costs approximately five soles (\$1.50) in the market. Likewise, his costs for curing the girl during ayahuasca sessions were also outrageous, as he charged the family five-hundred soles (~\$175 USD).

Finally, the man spoke of how the shaman manipulated the girl herself, during the ayahuasca session. While they were both under the influence of the beverage, the shaman spoke

gently to her, suggesting that he was there to save her and provide her with love. According to this individual, the shaman then removed the girl's bra, before sexually abusing her under her jeans. While the parents did not file charges with the police, the story spread through rumors, such as those spoken to me by the individual above. This seemed to be the primary manner in which such problems came to light; rumors, never solid facts (Cf. Dobkin de Rios & Rumrill 2008:98).

There has been at least one case of reported rape involving an ayahuasca tourist recently. A young 23-year-old German woman arrived in Iquitos in early March of 2010 to drink with a local curandero and his assistant. After paying S/.450 soles and drinking with the both of them two times, in which she experienced the expulsion of her "demons" and a re-awakening of her spirituality, she went to drink a third time. However, the ayahuasca was different, "I felt that I fainted or fell and lost my memory," she told the Peruvian newspaper El Comercio. She was then forced to perform oral sex on assistant as he threatened her life with a pistol. He then raped her repeatedly. When she awoke again, she was covered with bruises and various wounds, while her attackers had since fled. Luckily both individuals were known by neighbors in the barrio where the session was held and they were quickly identified and captured (El Comercio 2010).

However, such mental manipulation and subsequent physical violation by curanderos or their assistants are not the only corporeal problems associated with ayahuasca tourism. We must also worry about the effects these plant based psychoactives have upon mental faculties as well as bodily health. A number of studies, drawn mainly from participants in syncretic ayahuasca churches in Brazil such as the União de Vegetal (UDV) or Santo Daime, present the relative safety of the ayahuasca brew, consisting of *Banisteriopsis caapi* and *Psychotria viridis*, in

healthy individuals (Halpern & Pope 1999). However, ingesting MAO-Is and tryptamine psychedelics can cause a number of physical health issues, including raising both heart rate and blood pressure, as well as causing tachycardia in some users.

While serious health problems are quite uncommon when ingesting ayahuasca, as shown above, they do occur on occasion. Recently, a Swiss man who had been living in Iquitos for a number of years fell into a coma for ten days following an ayahuasca session. According to a newspaper article, the man had been waiting for a curandero to guide a ceremony for him, but as the shaman never showed, he decided to prepare and drink the concoction alone. Unfortunately this proved nearly fatal for the Swiss expat, although the doctors in Iquitos are not sure why (La Gaceta 2011).

Another critical issue, although I rarely encountered it during fieldwork, is the use of plants such as *toé*, *chiric sanango*, and *uchu sanango* as admixtures in the preparation of ayahuasca. The alkaloids found in these plants are all classified as delirants. As opposed to psychedelics, delirants cause so-called ‘true hallucinations,’ where one cannot tell the difference between fantasy and reality. Likewise, the intoxication can last up two three days and cause severe health related issues. While one curandero in Tarapoto always used *misha* in his preparation of San Pedro cactus, and a few would add small amounts to ayahuasca when necessary, the vast majority stayed far away from these plants. However, that is not to say that rumors of individuals utilizing the plants to intentionally cause harm in individuals were somewhat common.

On a cool evening in the small town of Lagunas, drinking *colmena*<sup>31</sup> with a number of friends, the conversation shifted to ayahuasca tourism. We had been speaking about tourists' experiences, as a Dutchman had been staying in the town off-and-on for the last two years. They presented a case that had happened there about a year prior to my arrival. A man had drunk ayahuasca with a prominent shaman in Lagunas; however, this time was much different as compared to other tourists' experiences. The man had a mental break during the session, ripping off his clothes before running out of the shaman's backyard and through the streets of Lagunas. My friends laughed telling me this story, as they chased the naked intoxicated man through the small town. Yet there is a large danger of self-harm when someone is so heavily intoxicated that they lose touch with reality. Such incidents have been reported in Iquitos as well.

Prescription drug interactions are perhaps one of the largest problems. Although some curanderos ask ayahuasca session participants what medication they are currently taking, many do not. An article from *Diario Voces* (2008) presents the true danger behind this issue. In the capital of San Martín, Moyobamba, a man was receiving treatment for his myriad stomach issues. He had gone to see a shaman one morning, hoping to gain some relief. After a short consultation, the shaman recommended the man take a plant beverage and a pill. Unfortunately, less than two hours after administering the *remedios* (remedies), the man suffered a heart attack and died in the home of the shaman. After the curandero brought the man to the hospital, he was apprehended by the police and charged with practicing medicine without a license.

The health of local peoples, especially indigenous peoples living on the edges of Amazonian society, is of paramount importance when examining ayahuasca tourism. It is well

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<sup>31</sup> Aguardiente mixed with wild honey

accepted that tourism itself is a prime carrier of disease today (Richter 2003). As such, when we have a large influx of tourists, often times backpackers moving through multiple countries on one trip, there is an increased risk of the spread of disease. All-inclusive ayahuasca tour packages, especially those in the area around Iquitos such as described in chapter four, involve visits to indigenous communities located nearby. While there, the tourists will usually observe a display of cultural customs, involving music and dance, and then perhaps participate in local life for a few hours. However, as these tourists make day trips to these indigenous communities, it is quite possible that they could be the carriers of disease. Witzig (1996) presents such a case among the Urarina of the Chambira basin and a group of “drug voyeur” tourists. A tour group, arranged by two Americans, would have a number of ayahuasca sessions in a lodge outside of Iquitos and then near the end of their stay visit an “authentic” indigenous community. According to Witzig, following a tour in the spring of 1995, the majority of children in the single village visited by the tour group fell ill with respiratory ailments requiring the use of antibiotics to recover. The community, apparently having not given permission to the tour group, filed complaints with both the American Embassy and the Peru Ministry of the Interior.

### **Shamanic Strife, Authentic Practice, and Challenged Structures**

Mindful of the aforementioned risks, in interviews the curanderos I worked with would question the knowledge and practice of other shamans, often in a debasing manner. For example, both José and Victor when asked about the use of admixtures in the preparation of ayahuasca expressed concern about the practice. Victor said, “Many of these curanderos aren’t well trained and cook ayahuasca with a lot of different plants. It doesn’t intoxicate people correctly and it is very possible to kill someone with it.” Likewise, José, as in Victor’s case, was a purist when it came to preparing the ayahuasca brew, noting that “the preparation of plants is very



problematic... I know people that combine up to 30 plants with ayahuasca. It's not ayahuasca, it's an imposter.”

Within the realm of authenticity, we see practitioners constantly questioning whether what others do is actually ayahuasca shamanism or not. One of the main factors is the reliance on indigenous identity as a source of both power and authenticity. With almost every curandero I interviewed, purportedly age-old, indigenous aspects of their practice were played up heavily, as shown in chapter three and four. However, within the neo-shamanic complex emerging in western Amazonia, a number of shamans integrate diverse aspects drawn from different world traditions in their healing art, like José with his practices of Reiki and reflexology. This leads to conflict between shamans, with those who are seen as being “purer” vegetalistas criticizing those that draw upon the power of mimesis and alterity as being somehow inauthentic in their practice. Carlos, a curandero from Tarapoto who had trained with Shipibo-Conibo shamans in the Ucayali region, told me that “what these people are doing is not what a native shaman does.” Another friend who runs a hardware store and bar where he produces *corteza*<sup>32</sup> based liquors told me that he too felt that those who integrate such far away sources were probably charlatans and could not possibly be practicing authentic shamanism.

While every curandero I spoke with believed that plant shamanism was open to all, regardless of nationality or ethnicity, many expressed problems with the training of foreigners in shamanic practice. While the actual training itself is usually accepted, what these newly formed gringo-curanderos do with their knowledge become problematic. A number of foreigners, who are trained in the Amazon, even for short periods, often return to their homes and proceed to

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<sup>32</sup> A corteza is a small section of the bark or inner flesh of a tree which is used in various healing and recreational practices

offer ayahuasca healing sessions. The shamans I spoke with found this troubling for two primary reasons, the first related to training and the second related to the further commodification of shamanic practices.

In order to become an ayahuasquero, one must usually undergo intense training as an apprentice, which can last over ten years.<sup>33</sup> When we have individuals arriving in the Amazon, training for short periods—anywhere from 2 weeks to 2 years—and then returning to their home countries or setting up ayahuasca lodges outside of cities such as Iquitos, some local ayahuasqueros find this to be extremely troubling, citing mainly health issues. They feel that if one is not properly trained then they will not have the relationships necessary with plant spirits to be able to cure properly. Speaking with José, he told me that those that are not well trained may use *ikaros* which allow evil spirits to enter participants' bodies, leading to serious health issues or even death.

When topics surrounding tourism and appropriation of practices are brought into the conversation, once again one sees conflicting viewpoints arise. On the one hand, many have said that anyone can come to partake in ayahuasca sessions or even learn how to cure. While on the other hand, there are those that feel ayahuasca tourism, or more specifically the unchecked appropriation of plant shamanism, will lead to cultural destruction among other things. This is seen in both voiced opinions of the local people as well as the shamans themselves.

For example, José, who was discussed in the last chapter, represents the first view. In interviews, he would often speak of both the knowledge surrounding the use of ayahuasca as

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<sup>33</sup> See chapters 2 and 3

well as the plant itself being open to everyone, with the exchange of information being extremely important for him. Indeed, he had married a Russian woman, who introduced him to Siberian shamanism while in exchange he introduced her to the ways of the Amazonian vegetalistas. This exchange of knowledge is also reflected in his touristic practices, with the name of his lodge being *Dos Mundos* (Two Worlds), reflecting the relations between various circulatory networks of knowledge exchange—between the spiritual and physical worlds as well as South American and Europe.

Other curanderos were less open to outsiders utilizing what they viewed as intellectual property, such as Bladi, who I first met in 2005 and has since grown to be a close friend. He has always been extremely politically active, being a former leader of a Kukama-Kukamiria organization (FEDECOCA) as well as working with AIDSESEP. I ended up going to visit Bladi at his home in the small town of Lagunas. One day on an early morning walk to the small market down the block from his home, I noticed another gringo heading down the street towards the port. Never passing up an opportunity to get some more data, I went to speak with him. Out of habit, I spoke in Spanish, and once he replied in a thick *charapa*<sup>34</sup> accent, I knew I had an interesting character on my hands. However, when I asked him about ayahuasca he was quite evasive and cryptic and never really let me know what he was doing in Lagunas. It was not until later that evening when I spoke with my friend that I found out the individual, whose name was Leandro, had been staying in the town off and on over the last two years, studying with one of the local ayahuasqueros. Originally Leandro had visited Bladi in the hopes that he would allow him to enter an apprenticeship. However, Bladi told me that he did not want to teach him as he

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<sup>34</sup> Literally “turtle” but also refers to the dialect of Spanish spoken in the Peruvian Amazon

was worried that Leandro would return to his homeland and sell the community's knowledge for huge profits. Unfortunately, it seemed Bladi was right. A day after I arrived in the community, Leandro was gone. He had decided to head back to the Netherlands where he hoped to offer ayahuasca sessions alongside his Reiki massage practice.

## **The Commoditization of Ayahuasca**

To better understand ayahuasca shamanism and the related practice of tourism, we must trace its trajectory as a commoditized “thing”—an object of knowledge, substance, and service. Through the study of a “thing” we can uncover its meanings, “inscribed in their forms, their uses, their trajectories” (Appadurai 1986:15). For ayahuasca shamanism, I suggest the analytical trifurcation of knowledge, substance, and service for a number of reasons. First of all, we can view ayahuasca shamanism as a system of knowledge, that is, a system of practices, ideologies, performances, etc. This is the ayahuasca shamanism that is traditionally passed from a *maestro* to his apprentice or constructed through continuous interaction with plant spirits. Second, we can think of ayahuasca shamanism in the context of substance—the ayahuasca itself and its related admixture plants. Finally, ayahuasca shamanism is a service beyond the beverage itself. Both tourists and local peoples turn to ayahuasca shamans for a wide range of services, paying in the process. There is much overlap between these levels. A critical analysis of these variances and interplays between commodity forms must be undertaken in order to gain understanding.

Drawing from Karl Marx's seminal work, *Das Kapital*, it is seen that the commodity form is simply an “object outside us” that satiates human wants or needs (2003:43). The commodity, the basic unit of capital, contains what Marx terms exchange-values and use-values. The use-value of a commodity is determined by its utility or usefulness which is expressed

through its consumption. A commodity's exchange-value, however, is derived from the expense of human labor-power during its production, which is expressed in its price or equivalent for trade.

The idea of labour-power is essential to understanding value in the commodity form. Labor-power is a capacity for production that is owned by the laborer. The value of labor-power is the "value of the means of subsistence necessary for the maintenance of the laborer" (2003:167). For a commodity, its value is determined by labor-time, or the value of labor-power expended in the production of the commodity. Within ayahuasca shamanism, we can think of labor-power as being necessarily derived from the amount of time a shaman has spent practicing his or her shamanic art, such as lengthy periods of apprenticeship.

While Marx provides a basic definition of the commodity, this is taken further by Arjun Appadurai. For Appadurai, commodities, just like humans, are imbued with "social lives," and to truly understand the commodity form we must "follow the things themselves" (1986:3, 5). Indeed, the social life of a commodity allows one to truly understand the multifarious manners in which a "thing," be it material or immaterial, is situated within a larger social context. Appadurai's view of exchange-value is also notable, as it is based upon desire—the desire of an individual for an object which is "fulfilled by the sacrifice of some other object, which is the focus of the desire of another" (1986:3). This "exchange of sacrifices" is especially obvious in ayahuasca shamanism, such as in indigenous communities in which textiles or animals are exchanged for healing (see Brown 1988). Likewise, Peter Gow notes that "ayahuasca shamans must be paid, and their fees are often exorbitant," which he likens to a parody of the system of

debt-peonage which has been ever-present throughout indigenous communities in Amazonia (1994:103; See also Chapter 2).

While often within indigenous cultures the barter system is utilized for shamanic services, today within the upper Amazon, mestizo shamanism is heavily commoditized. Although bartering is still utilized in mestizo practice, the variation in the price of shamanic sessions varies greatly. As the majority of my data is specific to ayahuasca, it seems like a good starting point. The lowest price I have found, aside from the free services that many curanderos said they offer the impoverished, involves either bartering for goods or a minimal cash exchange. In a small Lamista community, approximately eight hours by foot from the city of Lamas, one can attend an ayahuasca session with a respected indigenous healer for around 5 soles, or approximately \$1.50 USD.

Within urban areas, for locals, the cost ranges from fifteen to one hundred soles (~\$5 to \$35 USD), with the upper ends being thought of as exorbitantly high. The most common price I have found was fifty soles (\$17 USD) per session. Many of the local populace with which whom I spoke relayed that this price was seemingly fair. However, on the upper end the spectrum, one finds individual sessions with prices ranging from \$50 USD (S./ 150) to over \$300 USD (S./ 900). An article from the Brazilian newspaper Folha declares that tourists in the region of Acre, tourists pay up to \$1000 USD for a single ayahuasca session (Folha 2008). These prices are viewed by locals as being ludicrous. Those shamans that charge such high prices for their services are often times thought of by the locals to be charlatans. These prices bring with them a number of unintended consequences.

Finally, we see the practice of ayahuasca tourism contributing to the furthered marginalization of the rural and urban poor, as well as among certain curanderos. The disparity in income between those that run ayahuasca lodges and the rest of the community is quite wide. On top of this, the prices for participation in sessions at some lodges are quite high, sometimes up to \$300 USD for a single session. Utilizing such high prices in their practice has led locals to view these curanderos as being primarily charlatans, simply using ayahuasca as a means to generate capital. While individuals still wanted to experience sessions in these exclusive lodges, due to their high price, they become primarily for upper class Peruvians or vacationing foreigners. Ayahuasca shamanism as an unbroken tradition is challenged by the issues outlined above. However, even with these pressures upon its structure, we see that its power as a cultural institution continues, and in some manners has increased. I see views on ayahuasca shamanism as being linked to class and economic status.

With high prices, as seen in many of the all-inclusive ayahuasca lodges, local peoples are often marginalized. While many I spoke with had interest in participating in ayahuasca sessions at the larger, more well-known lodges, they knew they would never have a chance due to the debilitating price structure. Likewise, among local curanderos, prices are always a common theme of conversation. Many I spoke with thought that any shaman that charged over S/. 100 PEN for an ayahuasca session was surely a charlatan abusing the ignorance of a tourist. Another issue related to the commoditization of ayahuasca and the subsequent generation of capital from its sale is in regard to the local economy. Many individuals, especially those foreigners who have bought land and setup an ayahuasca lodge in Peru, will often live only part of the time in the country, while the rest of their time is spent in their homeland, depriving the local economy of

much needed economic stimulation. Indeed, it seems like the commodification of ayahuasca itself is perfectly accepted among local peoples in upper Amazonia. However, these individuals as well as shamans themselves perceive a limit to such commodification, related to price structure as well as physical distance from the “source.” As stated earlier, a price of S/.50 to a maximum of S/.100 is viewed as being the “normal” price of an ayahuasca session, which is derived from the knowledge of the market value of the plants utilized to create the brew and the shaman’s labour-power in the form of the preparation of the beverage and his ritual practice.

As commoditized ayahuasca flows through the global ethnosphere, certain issues arise which challenge its efficacy and power. Perhaps the most important of these is related to the issue of biopiracy and intellectual property. In the mid-1980s, after visiting the Amazon, an individual named Loren Miller brought a cutting of ayahuasca vine back with him to the United States, founding his own company International Plant Medicine Corp in the process. Once back in the States, he quickly applied for and received a patent for his variety of ayahuasca vine. For a number of years he held the patent without any problems. However, in 1994 the indigenous federations of the Amazon learned of the patent and pressed forward with legal action. In 1999 hundreds of indigenous leaders, dressed in full regalia, arrived in Washington to protest the patent (Lambrecht 1999). After much legal battling, the indigenous peoples of the Amazon lost their case, and Miller was able to keep his patent (Tupper 2008:4). Such appropriation of the actual materials required for ayahuasca shamanism is one but one segment of a larger issue. We also see the hyper-commoditization of ayahuasca knowledge through numerous seminars, retreats, and books dedicated to the practice. As these forms move through the global markets, local practitioners lose control over them (George 2010). Likewise, such extreme



commoditization as seen today with the emergence of the ayahuasca boom can lead to the alienation of producers, in which the value of ayahuasca shamanism will be lost (Marx 2003).

Finally, the problematic of sustainability and ayahuasca tourism is of great importance. As the practice grows, native ranges of *Banisteriopsis caapi* and other plants are being constantly diminished. Due to this, every curandero I spoke with either grew their own, if they had the means of production to do so. However, more often they buy it from various suppliers in Chazuta, Tarapoto, or even from the Pastaza region. Ayahuasca takes a relatively long time to grow, at least two years from seedling to a usable state. Most curanderos believe that the older the ayahuasca plant is the more potent it will be; those which are six years old or more are highly sought after by those preparing the brew. To be truly effective, plants should be harvested by a shaman who has observed a *dieta*. As such, this presents a problem for those *gringo* shamans working outside of the jungle. For example, Leandro, who I mentioned previously, provides ayahuasca sessions in his natal city of Amsterdam. However, the Dutch shaman must import all his ayahuasca either from sources in the Peruvian Amazon or through online merchants.

## **Resistance**

The idea of resisting the selling of ayahuasca knowledge and practice was a common theme in a Kukama-Kukamiria community I visited during the summer of 2010. The populace of the small village of Puka Tipishca was looking for sustainable ways in which to generate capital for their community in the face of an extractive economy that was slowly destroying the forest around them. As they were well aware of the influx of tourists due to the proximity of Lagunas, which sees a large number of visitors due to its access to the Pacaya-Samiria Reserve, they too had hoped to enter the lucrative market in tourism. This region is considered an area of extreme

poverty, with an average income of less than \$50 a month, with many living off of less than \$1 a day (Barham et al. 1999:39). Speaking with a former *apu* (leader), he began to tell me about his ideas regarding tourism in the region, such as eco-tourism or pesca-tourism.<sup>35</sup> I asked him what he thought about setting up an ayahuasca lodge in the community, in which he replied that it would be wrong to do such a thing. He believed that ayahuasca was an extremely important facet of his culture, being intrinsically linked to the identity of the Kukama-Kukamiria, and as such must be treated with respect. While he was an ayahuasquero and had even offered to drink with me at one time, he and his community had rejected the practice of ayahuasca tourism. This reflects what Harrison terms pollution and appropriation of cultural boundaries. On the one hand the Kukama feel their culture is threatened by outside invasion and displacement, yet on the other hand one notes a fear of cultural piracy (Harrison 1999:13). Likewise, this “cultivated marginality” through resistance to the tourist market, enhances the sense of authenticity amongst Kukama-Kukamiria ayahuasqueros (Yamada 2009:334).

One sees ayahuasca lodges themselves contributing to the continued importance of ayahuasca in the daily lives of those living in the region. For instance, in May 2008, a prominent ayahuasca lodge along with local curanderos petitioned the national government to promote ayahuasca as part of the nation’s cultural patrimony. In their declaration, the plants utilized in the preparation of ayahuasca as well as its intangible knowledge and ritual practices were declared cultural heritage by this mixed indigenous, mestizo, and gringo group of shamans. The document argues that ayahuasca ceremonies form one of the main pillars in the construction of indigenous

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<sup>35</sup> Pesca-tourism, or tourism surrounding fishing, has become another major tourist attraction. Individuals from all over come to the Amazon, usually in eastern Peruvian Amazonia, in order to fish the many rivers and lagoons which dot the landscape. Game fish such as *paiche* and *tucunaré* are extremely popular.

identity, and as such, must be shown as being distinct from the “decontextualized occidental, consumer, and commercial purposes” (Villacorta 2008:2). While this has not had much effect on the increasing delocation and commodification of ayahuasca in the tourist market, it adds a degree of protection for those indigenous groups who utilize it in their social practice.

## **Conclusion**

The ayahuasca boom continues to be a major factor in the economic and social development of Amazonia. The circulation of knowledge related to ayahuasca in the global ethnosphere, the heavy commoditization of the materials and practice of ayahuasca shamanism, as well as ayahuasca tourism, all contribute heavily to the boom. However, through the various examples elucidated above I demonstrate that although its power and efficacy is challenged on many fronts, ayahuasca shamanism as a social form remains an integral facet of life in the upper Amazon. While many authors cast ayahuasca shamanism as an ahistorical hermeneutic system, I hope with my analysis I have destabilized this construction. Views from local peoples differ just as much as those among shamanic practitioners, but one thing remains apparent: ayahuasca shamanism is a constantly evolving set of cultural practices and beliefs.

How this practice is structured, through an ontology based on mimesis and alterity—the copying of the Other—is extremely important for understanding the changes taking place within the field of ayahuasca shamanism. These include all ayahuasca practices in Amazonia—indigenous, mestizo, and neo-shamanism—highlighting the deep integration of the ontology. Indeed, with the ontology in place, questions of charlatans and appropriation of ritual practice *within* Amazonia becomes problematic, as one cannot simply examine the aesthetics or practice of the shaman, but instead must examine them within the shamanic continuum in a localized

frame. While charlatans are certainly an issue to be dealt with, their presence in ayahuasca tourism, at least in far western Amazonia, has been overstated.

As we move into the twenty first century, the future of ayahuasca shamanism is uncertain. While it remains culturally significant throughout the Amazon, with various global pressures exerting their forces locally its continued importance is debatable. Issues related to alienation, marginalization, cultural degradation, and the sustainability of practice are all still little understood in the context of the ayahuasca boom. Only through further studies will we be able to truly understand the myriad structural changes taking place within the structure of ayahuasca shamanism and its effects both locally and globally.

## Appendix A

### Ayahuasca Admixtures

*Banisteriopsis muriata*. (Ott 1994:16)

*Banisteriopsis longialata*. (Ott 1994:16)

*Banisteriopsis lutea* (Ott 1994:16)

*Banisteriopsis martiniana* var *subnervia* (Ott 1994:16)

*Brugmansia aurea* Solanaceae. “Toé,” “Mariacahua,” “Floripondio,” “Misha” (Duke & Vasquez 1994:33)

*Brunfelsia chiricaspi* Solanaceae. “Chiricaspi,” “Chiric Sanango” (Duke & Vasquez 1994:34)

*Brunfelsia grandiflora*. Solanaceae. “Chiric Sanango,” “Moca pari” (Duke & Vasquez 1994:34)

*Calathea veitchiana*. Marantaceae. (Flores & Lewis 1978:154)

*Callaeum antifebrile* (Ott 1994:16)

*Datura suaveolens* (Flores & Lewis 1978:154)

*Diplopterys cabrerana*. Malpighiaceae. “Yaji” “Chaliponga” “Chagropona” “Chacrana” “Oco-Yagé” (Bennett 1992:486; Ott 1994:23)

*Iochroma fuchsioides* (Flores & Lewis 1978:154)

*Juanulloa ochracea* Solanaceae. “Azul,” “Cuya cuya,” “Pishco isma colorado” (Duke & Vasquez 1994:99)

*Lophanthera lactescens* (Ott 1994:16)

*Malouetia tamaquarina* Apocynaceae. “Chicle caspi” (Duke & Vasquez 1994:110)

*Psychotria alba* Rubiaceae. “Tupamaqui,” “Ucumi-micuna,” “Yagé” (Duke & Vasquez 1994:146)

*Psychotria carthaginensis* Rubiaceae. “Sameruca,” “Yagé” (Duke & Vasquez 1994:146)

*Psychotria horizontalis* Rubiaceae. “Tupamaqui” (Duke & Vasquez 1994:146)

*Psychotria marginata* Rubiaceae. “Yagé,” “Sanaguillo” (Duke & Vasquez 1994:147)

*Psychotria stenostachya* Rubiaceae. “Yagé,” “Rumo sachá” (Duke & Vasquez 1994:147)

*Tabernaemontana* sp. Apocynaceae. (Flores & Lewis 1978:154)

*Teraptychus styloptera* (Ott 1994:16)

*Teliostachya lanceolata* Acanthaceae. “Toé negro” (Duke & Vasquez 1994:167)

*Tetraptychus mucronata* (Ott 1994:16)

## Appendix B

### Diet Information

From Luna (1986:52-3):

Allowed to be eaten-

\* Fish: sábalo (*Brycon melanoptherum*, *B. erythoperum*), boquichico (*Prochilodus nigricanas*), bujurqui (*Mesonauta insignis*; *Heros appendiculatus*), anashúa (*Crenicichla johanna*), tucunaré (*Cichla monoculus*), sardina (*Triportheus angulatus*, *T. elongatus*), paco (*Colossoma bidens*), gamitana (*Piaractus brachypomus*), corvina (*Plagioscion auratus*, *P. squamosissimum*), paiche (*Arapaima gigas*), palometa (subfamily *Myleinae*, including *Mylossoma sp.*), carahuasú (*Astronotus ocellatus*) and fasaco (*Hoplias malabaricus*).

\* Birds: panguana (*Crypturellus unulatus*), pucacunga (*Penelope jacquacu*), perdiz (*Crypturellus spp.*), and turkey

\* Reptiles: lagarto blanco (*Caiman sclerops*), several species of boa (*Boidae Fam.*)

Not to be eaten-

\* Mammals: sajino (*Tayassu tajacu*), huangana (*Tayassu pecari*), sachavaca (*Tapirus terrestris*), motelo (*Testudo tabulata*), huapo negro (*Pitheca monachus*), huapo colorado (*Cacajao calvus rubicundus*), coto (*Alouata seniculus*), choro (*Lagothrix lagothricha*), maquisapa (*Ateles paniscus chameck*, *Ateles paniscus belzebuth*), mono negro and mono blanco

\* Certain birds: guacamayo rojo (*Ara macao*), paujil (*Mitu mitu*), and trompetero (*Psophialeucoptera*)

\* Certain reptiles: shushupi (*Crotalidae Fam.*) and jergón (*Bothrops atrox*)

\* Certain fish: pana (*Serrasalmus sp.*) and zúngaro (collective term for large catfish of the *Pimelodidae* family)

## Appendix C

### Glossary

Agua de Florida – Commercially produced ‘perfumes’ utilized by curanderos for protection and other ritual activities

Ayahuasca – Refers to vines of *Banisteriopsis spp.*; also refers to the beverage created with the ayahuasca vine (and other admixtures)

Ayahuasquero – A practitioner who focuses his or her work on the use of ayahuasca

Ayllu – Kechwa system of social organization; can refer to both a family and a community

Banco (banku) – The highest level of shaman in the Amazon

Baño de Floricimiento – “Floral Bath”; ritual cleansing used to purify an individual and give them luck

Brebaje – Potion

Brujeria – ‘Witchcraft’; Dark shamanism

Brujo – One that practices dark shamanism

Camalonga – *Thevia peruviana*; combined with aguardiente or other liquids to create a powerful smelling concoction. Used by shamans for protection during ayahuasca ceremonies.

Chacrana – *Psychotria viridis*. The main admixture in the ayahuasca brew contains high levels of dimethyltryptamine.

Chiric Sanango – *Brunfelsia grandiflora*. Used by shamans for a variety of purposes. The class of shaman known as a *sananguero* uses this plant and *uchu sanango* exclusively in their ritual practice.

Chupar – Literally “to suck”; refers to the practice by shamans of sucking pathogens, usually in the form of small animals or darts, from a patient's body.

Consultorio – “Doctor’s office”; A term used by ayahuasqueros to refer to their offices where they would give consultations during the day.



Curandero – ‘Traditional’ healer in Latin America

Dieta (Sasikuy) – The dieta, also known as sasikuy in Kechwa, is a form of abstinence practiced at various important points in life. Within the realm of shamanism, one diets before consuming a plant – usually only eating an extremely bland diet and avoiding all contact with the opposite sex. Likewise, the dieta can also refer to the taking of a single plant over an extended period of time in order to better understand that plant (see Chapter 2 for more information).

Dimethyltryptamine (DMT) – A psychoactive tryptamine alkaloid found in chacruna as well as other plants and animals.

Harmin – Psychoactive mono amine oxidase inhibitor found in the ayahuasca vine.

Huesero – Healer specializing in the skeletal system

Ikaro – A power song often used to call forth spirits in healing ceremonies.

Limpieza – Ritual cleansing

Madre – A plant spirit

Marear (Mareado) – Literally “to become dizzy”; specifically refers to the intoxication felt while under the influence of a hallucinogenic plant.

Mesa – Ritual table utilized by shamans throughout the North Coast and western Amazon regions of Peru.

Palero – Shaman that specializes in the use of *palos* (sticks) and *cortezas* (barks)

Perfumero – Shaman that utilizes scent, through the use of subtle perfumes, in his or her practice

Pusanga – Love magic

Pusanguero – One that prepares pusanga

Sacharuna – From the Kechwa ‘*sacha*’ (jungle) and ‘*runa*’ (people); refers to spiritual entities that reside in the jungle; also known as the “owners of the forest”

Shacapa – The leaves of the shacapa plant (*Pariana spp.*) bundled together with palm fibers. Used during ayahuasca ceremonies as a percussive instrument.

Soplar – Literally “to blow”; refers to the action of the shaman as he blows tobacco smoke over patients body; also refers to the action of blowing a spirit dart at an enemy

Tabaquero – A shaman that specializes in the use of tobacco

Tambo – Originally a Kechwa term that signified a hostel-like structure where k'ipu runners would rest, tambos in western Amazonia refer to small hut structures located in the bush. These are often used by individuals who are dieting.

Toé – Refers to the plant *Brugmansia sauvolens*; contains high levels of scopolamine, atropine, and other delirants.

Toero – A shaman that uses primarily toé

Trago – Literally 'alcoholic drink'; refers to beverages made through a combination of jungle plants (e.g. barks and roots) or animals (e.g. ants and snakes) and aguardiente (cane liquor).

Telepathine – see *harmine*

Vegetalismo – Plant spirit-based understanding of reality; individuals consume plants in order to understand the plant better. Francoise Barbira-Freedman refers to vegetalismo as a "science"

Vegetalista – One that practices vegetalismo; also becomes synonymous with ayahuasquero at times.

Yageine – see *harmine*

Yakuruna – From Kechwa yaku (water) and runa (people); spiritual entities that live beneath the rivers known for kidnapping women and children

## Figures



Figure 1 – The distribution of indigenous ayahuasca use in South America

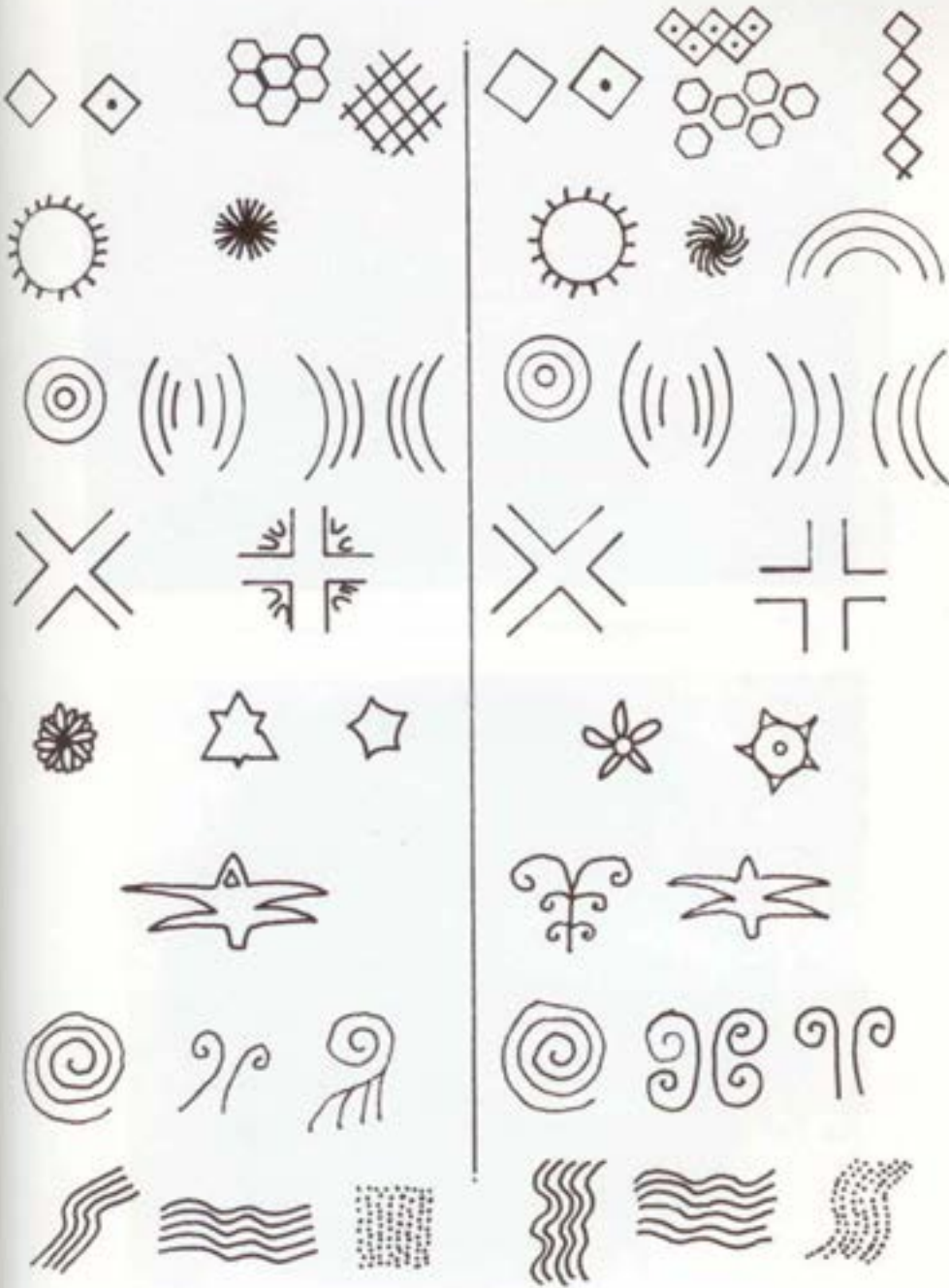


**Banisteriopsis caapi**  
Image by E.W. Smith

Figure 2 – Botanical drawing of *Banisteriopsis caapi*



Figure 3 – Botanical drawing of *Psychotria viridis*



A selection of phosphene patterns.

Figure 4 – Phosphene forms (Reichel-Dolmatoff 1987)



Figure 5 – Map of field work region

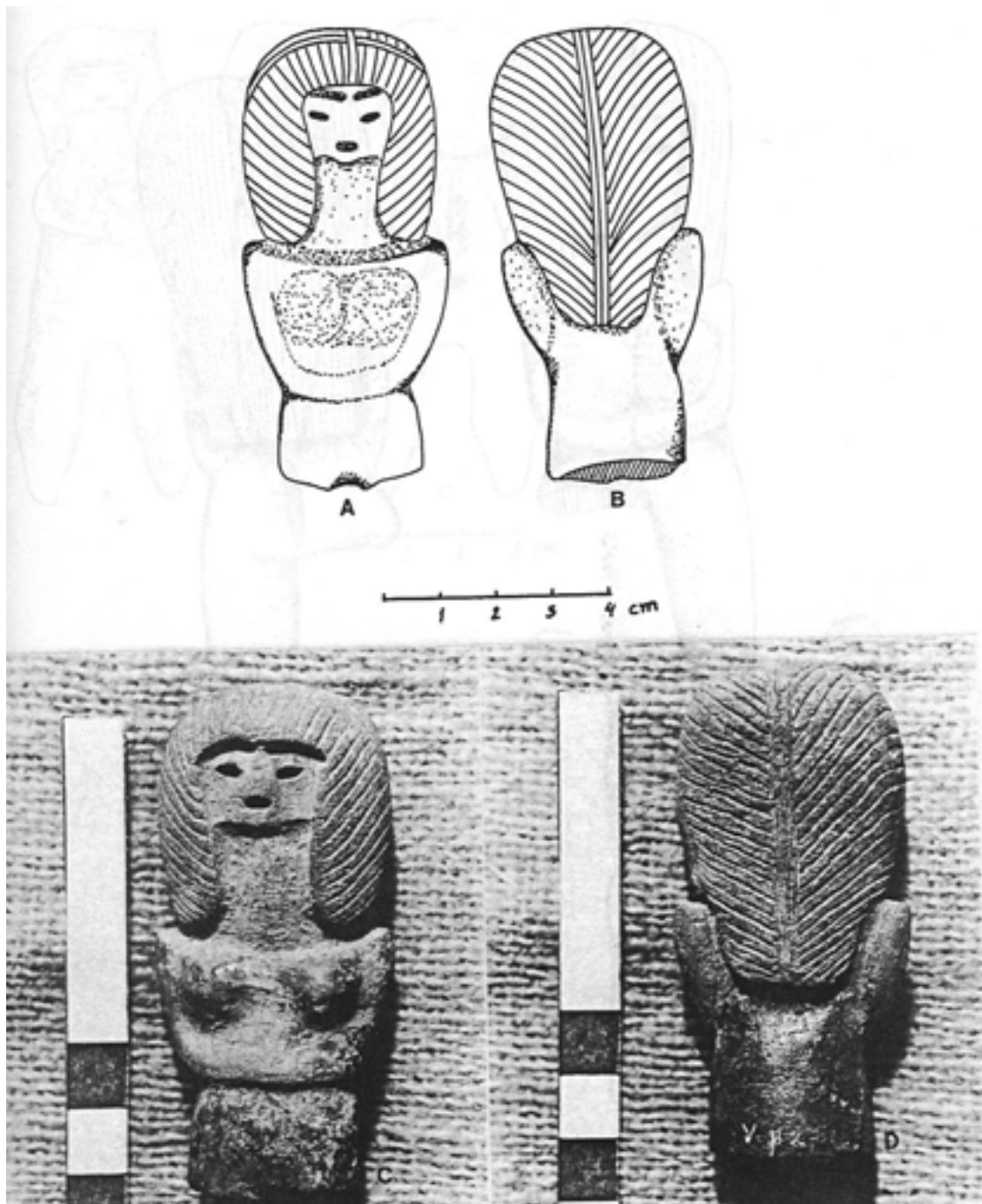


Figure 6 – Valdivia figurine examples (Stahl 1986)





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Figure 7 – *Wizard of the Upper Amazon* Advertisement (Unknown 1982)

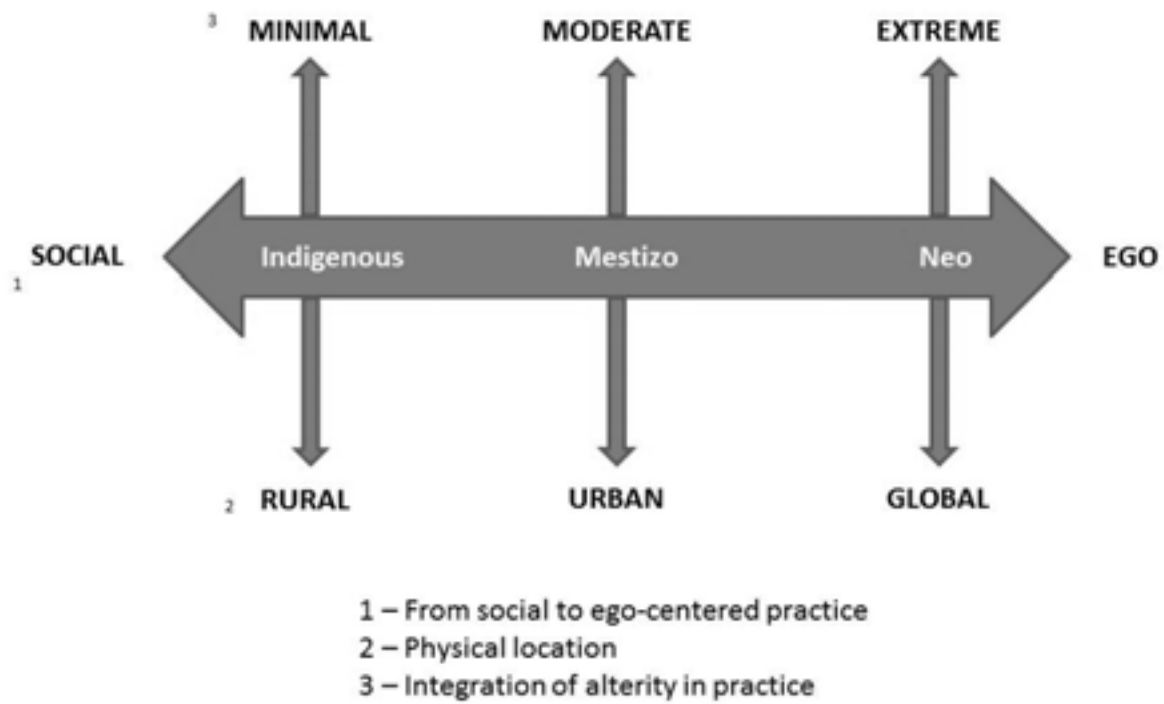


Figure 8 – The shamanic continuum



Figure 9 – Various imported remedies in Felipe’s store

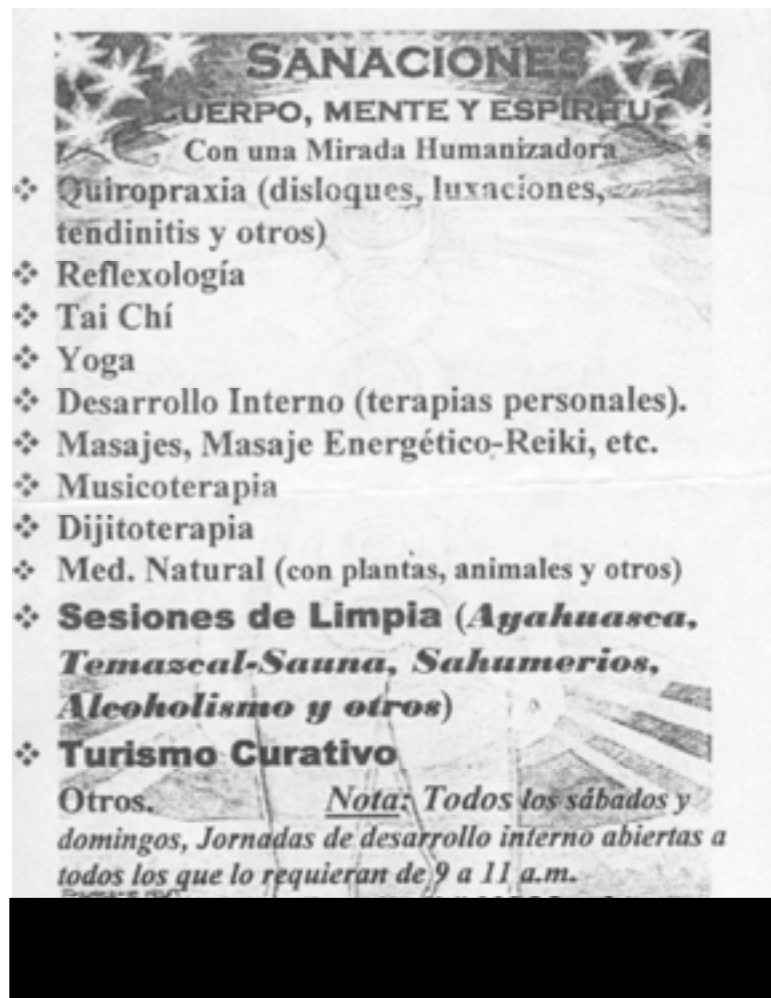


Figure 10 – Flyer from José's Consultorio

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