

Mantay Kunay Kayadididi:  
A Lyrical Analysis of the Icaros of a Peruvian Curandera

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## Introduction

Ayahuasca shamanism is a form of Amazonian shamanism that is spreading both throughout the Amazon as well as throughout the world. In the past few decades it has been adopted by indigenous groups who formerly practiced other forms of social and individual healing (Shepard 1998; Shepard 2004). Other groups both within South America and beyond, especially Europe and North America, have adopted and transformed the practice, often in profound ways. Ayahuasca shamanism is a complex ethnomedical practice that incorporates medicinal plants, music and ritual. The nature of the current practice, its origins, and its current trajectory all provide ample fodder for researchers.

In this paper, a close analysis of the music of one Peruvian *curandera* (healer) sheds some light on issues in ethnomedicine, Amazonian history and the nature of shamanic practice. Here I focus on a selection of the *icaros* of one *curandera* from northern Peru, whom for anonymity's sake we will call "Rosalina." She is well known for her work leading ceremonies for a primarily non-indigenous audience throughout the Americas. The recordings analyzed in this paper were sung during a ceremony in North America in about 2002. I offer two translations to frame the discussion. One, represented as Track 2 of the recordings, is exemplary of the majority of the other songs; the other, Canción de los Tribus, raises unique issues for discussion.

Information for this paper is derived from the author's long-term acquaintance with Rosalina, formal and informal interviews with her, analysis of archival materials, and the author's several years of participant observation in shamanic and neo-shamanic activities in South and North America. Translation was informed by a study of Ecuadorian Kichwa

and to a lesser extent, the Kichwa of San Martin province of northern Peru. Furthermore, the author is a musician and songwriter of over 20 years' experience, educated in the Appalachian folk and popular music traditions of North America.

## Ritual Setting

Ayahuasca shamanism centers around the ritual consumption of a hallucinogenic decoction prepared from an Amazonian vine known as ayahuasca (*Banisteriopsis caapi*). Together with various admixtures, ayahuasca is prepared as a thick strong tea, with effects that range from nausea, vomiting and diarrhea to visual and auditory hallucinations. While the ayahuasca vine itself has mild psychoactive properties, indigenous and mestizo *ayahuasqueros* (shamanic practitioners) usually add other plants, most commonly *chacrana* (*Psychotria viridis*), to enhance the visionary effects. The tea made from the combination of plants is also called ayahuasca. The active ingredients in ayahuasca, as recognized by Western pharmacology, are harmine and harmaline (formerly known as *telepathine*, *yageine*, and *banistereine*) (Ott 1993:210). These alkaloids are part of a class of chemicals called monoamine oxidase inhibitors; they inhibit the body's metabolism of other chemicals, in this case dimethyltryptamine (DMT), a powerful hallucinogen, which is found in the *chacrana* leaf. Under normal circumstances, the human digestive system breaks down DMT before it has a chance to affect the central nervous system. If taken non-orally (through smoking or injection), DMT produces a powerful, often destabilizing experience that lasts mere minutes before the body metabolizes the chemical. However, the length of a DMT trip is inversely related to its intensity: many users report a fearsome experience, and participants in one study reported lasting emotional distress subsequent to clinical administration of the drug (Strassman 2001:263, 272).

Ayahuasca shamanism is employed by both indigenous and mestizo healers in a range of settings, from urban centers to both dispersed and nucleated indigenous communities. Participants may be a sick person with their family, local community members, tourists, or a combination thereof. In healing processes, the brew is used by the shaman as a means of diagnosis, divination and connection with the spirit world, where negotiations or other interventions may be made on behalf of the patient. These

ceremonies are performed largely or entirely in darkness, using music as a central element of the ritual. In traditional settings, the shaman sings, chants and whistles, and may use a leaf rattle known as a “chacapa” or “surupanga.” The ritual use of tobacco and the blowing of tobacco smoke (“*soplada*”) is almost universal, and many shamans also use a preparation called “*agua florida*,” which they spray from their mouths in a fine mist over the patient or recipient.

In the past several decades, the ritual use of ayahuasca has spread to distant urban centers in South America as well as throughout the northern hemisphere, especially Europe and North America. In these settings, organizers bring shamans from South America to perform ceremonies for what are often large groups of people interested in experiencing the healing and visionary effects of the legendary brew. Fees may range from a few hundred to several hundred dollars for a two- or three-day event. Increasingly, groups in Europe and America are electing to hold ceremonies without a South American practitioner. They may share the leadership role, or they may rely on someone who has performed some degree of shamanic training in the Amazon. In these neo-shamanic settings, a variety of musical forms may be used including songs learned from recordings of traditional ceremonies, songs composed or adapted for ceremonial purposes, and recorded music.

### *Icaros*

The music associated with ayahuasca shamanism comprises a genre of songs which are most often referred to in the literature as “*icaros*.” Ethnomusicologist Bernd Brabec de Mori (2011) argues that the cross-cultural use of the term “*icaro*” suggests a unique cultural origin for the practice of ayahuasca shamanism as we know it, a practice which was subsequently adopted wholesale by an increasing number of ethnic groups. He notes that these songs often use Kichwa (lowland Quechua) lyrics where other healing and social songs are sung only in a mother tongue, and that these songs sound distinct from other songs of a given tribe. Some of Brabec’s findings are specific to the middle Ucayali River and may be contradicted for other areas, as we’ll see. Nevertheless, in the contemporary academic, popular and Amazonian discourse around Peruvian shamanism, the term *icaro*

has the greatest currency. Most importantly, it is the term by which Rosalina refers to her own songs.

Like other indigenous groups around the world (Densmore 1927 for native North America; Roseman 1996 for Malaysia), Amazonian peoples believe that *icaros* are gifts from the spirits, obtained by the shaman through dreams or through visions, usually those resulting from the ingestion of psychoactive plant preparations during shamanic apprenticeship or shamanic practice (Beyer 2009; Luna 1984a; Luna 1984b; Luna 1992). However, *icaros* are often acquired in other ways. Songs may be learned from other shamans, and Beyer (2009) reported the use of recorded material to learn new songs. Despite the prevalence in the literature of a supernatural origin for *icaros*, my experience indicates that most are learned from other humans.

*Icaros* have a number of functions. Beyer (2009:66) writes that they have three purposes: “to call spirits, to ‘cure’ objects and endow them with magical power, and to modulate the visions induced by ayahuasca.”

The use of *icaros* to call spirits is one of their main functions. Luna writes:

It seems the preeminent mode of communication between the shaman and the spirits is through magic chants or melodies. The spirits often present themselves to the shaman while singing or whistling a particular *icaro*. When the shaman learns these *icaros*, he can use them to call on the spirits when he needs them. By singing or whistling the *icaro* of the plant teachers, the shaman invites the spirits to present themselves. [Luna 2006:44]

As for “curing” objects, Beyer (2009:67) writes that the word *icarar*, which he denotes as a Kichwa term, means to “sing or whistle an *icaro* over a person, object or preparation to give it power...Another term for the same process is *curar*, cure...in the sense that fish or cement is cured, made ready for use.” One of my informants explained to me that when a shaman makes the ayahuasca brew, he must sing over it while it cooks. He said that he often enlists help from other shamans whose singing he admires, because he thinks that their singing imparts special powers to the ayahuasca.

One of the most commonly referenced uses for *icaros* is to shape the visionary experience. A young painter of indigenous and mestizo Peruvian descent explained to me how the *icaros* of a particular shaman during ceremony opened up entire landscapes and

cities, which the artist was later able to render in paintings. Reichel-Dolmatoff (1996:172) finds similar patterns in the use of shamanic music by the Tukano of Colombia:

The dimension of music can be appreciated only if we realize its influence upon specific states of awareness. The perception of music, instrumental or sung, is greatly enhanced by *Banisteriopsis*, and individual instruments or tunes trigger specific associations and hallucinatory images. Shamans are masters in orchestrating the many different sensorial components of collective ceremonies, with emphasis upon auditory stimuli, interspersed with sudden silences or noisy episodes.

Fred Katz and Marlene Dobkin de Rios (1971) liken *icaros* to Gregorian chants in their use of tonal relationships to evoke a spiritual experience based on a particular cultural context. Based on his own participant observation, Katz (Katz & de Rios 1971) suggests that the quality of the chanting, specifically its speed, is directly related to the quality and content of the hallucinations experienced by those in the room. Sabine Rittner (2007) observed that the hallucinatory effects of *icaros* may be experienced even without the ingestion of ayahuasca.

Above all else, however, *icaros* are a tool for healing. Luna emphasizes repeatedly that healing is effected through the use of melody (Luna 1984b; Luna 1992). “The following point should be stressed,” Luna writes (2006:45); “it is believed that it is the melody itself that has curative powers.” The power to heal lies in a shaman’s collection of *icaros*; they may be used in place of medicines, or they may be used to enhance the activity of medicines (Luna 1992). One of Luna’s informants told him, “If you have learned from *ayahúman*...[a medicinal plant], you do not need to go out to the forest to bring its bark, because you already know its *icaro*” (Luna 1992:244).

## Overview of the Songs

The songs analyzed in this paper were recorded during a ceremony in North America, likely in 2002. I obtained a copy of these recordings directly from the ceremony’s organizer. However, these recordings have since become widely distributed through underground trading networks, and some even appear on YouTube. The recordings analyzed do not represent the songs in their entirety. Most of the tracks run less than ten

minutes, whereas during ceremony, Rosalina may sing each song for an hour or more. A given ceremony can last for several hours, with the *curandera* singing almost non-stop.

Seventeen tracks make up the recording of the ceremony in question. Some of the tracks contain only drumming in a simple meter of 3 or 4 beats, and others contain only melodic humming or vocables. In all but the drumming-only tracks, the songs are melodic, relatively quick-tempo, and very repetitive. Short strophes are repeated numerous times with small changes from one verse to the next. Songs are often introduced with the whistling or humming of a short melody unrelated to the other melodic motifs present in the song. This seems akin to the “starting up a song” that Roseman reports as being a structural element in Malaysian shamanic music (Roseman 1996).

Despite the prevalence in both scholarly and popular media of a belief in the supernatural origins of *icaros*, this particular *curandera* asserted that she learned them directly from her *maestro*, or teacher (one “Eduardo Ramirez”) through repetition and memorization. “I have not had this experience” of receiving the songs directly from the spirits, she told me. “We can only deal with what each person has experienced, and my experience is that I learned these songs from my teacher.” In a magazine interview with her teacher that has been reprinted online, Ramirez did affirm the notion that spirits of the plants offer guidance and information to the shaman; he did not, however, comment on the origins of his own songs (De la Mota 1997).

#### Transcription and Analysis of Track 2 (Untitled)

This song opens with one verse of whistling, then several verses of melodic vocables. Each strophe or verse is four lines, and each line varies only slightly from the others, with a falling melodic pattern. Each verse lasts about 15 seconds. The lyrics begins on line two, verse six:

Madre tierra shamudidididi

Madre tierra shamudidididi

Mantay kunay kayadidididi

Vocables verse x 3

Pomporegano shamudididi

Mantay kunay kayadidididi

Pomporegano shamudididi

Mantay kunay kayadidididi

Vocables one line

Mentha mentha shamudidididi

Mentha mentha shamudidididi

Mantay kunay kayadidididi

Paico paico shamudidididi

Mantay kunay kayadidididi

Kayadito mantainininini

Mantay kunay kayadidididi

Verbena shamudididididi

Mantay kunay kayadidididi

Kayadito mantainininini

Mantay kunay kayadidididi

Piñon shamudidididididi

Piñon shamudidididididi

Piñon shamudidididididi

Piñon kayadidididi

The song continues for several verses after this, listing more plants: lausedilla, yerba buena, yawar piri-piri, yawar panga, sagrilla, yerba santa.

The most common theme throughout the lyrical content of Rosalina's ceremonial repertoire is the insertion of a word or phrase at the beginning of each line or strophe, followed by phrases in Kichwa that are repeated throughout the song. In this *icaro*, except

for the opening strophe that invokes “madre tierra,” the variant in each strophe is the name of a plant, usually medicinal. *Pampa oregano* (*Lippia alba*) is used in Northern Peru for digestion (Sanz-Biset et al. 2009). *Paico* (*Chenopodium ambrosioides*) is a plant used in shamanic apprenticeship for purification and cleansing as well as to increase sensitivity, intuition, and memory (Jauregui et al. 2011). Verbena is a common garden plant of the mint family, used for any number of applications, often in a pleasant fragrant tea or as an essential oil. Piñon is the pine tree. It is the source of food (pine nuts), resin and aromatic oils, and is the dominant species in many ecosystems. Remaining strophes in this song invoke lausedilla, yerba buena, yawar piri-piri, yawar panga, sagrilla, yerba santa. Two of these terms are unidentified; the rest are medicinal plants. Other songs invoke animals, birds, and even different indigenous groups.

The Kichwa phrases in this icaro are phrases of invocation:

- **Shamudididi:** Shamui is the command form of the Kichwa verb “to come.”
- **Kayadididi:** Kaya means “tomorrow,” which doesn’t make much sense in the context of these songs. However, “kallari,” which is pronounced “kayadi,” comes from the Kichwa verb “kallarina,” to begin.
- **Mantai kunai kayadididi:** In San Martin Kichwa, “mantay” means to lay out one’s manta or to cover something with it. “Kuna” means “now, today” in Napo Kichwa (but not San Martin). “Kaya” means “tomorrow” but it also means “to give,” whereas “killer” (pronounced “kayadi”) is derived from the Kichwa verb “kallarina,” “to begin.” General sense of the phrase: “Give cover now,” an invocation of the protective powers of the plants, animals, medicines or tribes named.
- **Kayaditu mantaininini.** The San Martin dictionary lists “kallaridu,” an adjective meaning “beginning.” “Mantay,” again, is to cover, “niy” is “to say,” and “-ni” is a first-person present tense marker in Ecuador. Ambiguity. The general sense that I take from this is the movement to cover the ceremonial group in a protective action.

These same phrases appear throughout Rosalina’s repertoire and serve as lyrical-melodic building blocks, which can be adapted to various melodies and meters with the use of vocables added to the ends of phrases. This system of melodic and lyrical building blocks is perfect for a setting in which improvisation is a valuable tool, in which cognitive alteration



may be high due to the ingestion of hallucinatory substances, and in which many hours of singing place a high demand on the ceremonial leader.

In the ethnographic material, reports closest to this geographic region are from Luna, who indicates that the most common uses of the *icaros* are to call the spirits and to invoke protective forces (Luna 1992). The frequent use of “shamudi” is a command form of “to come,” calling the spirits of plants, animals, landscape features (rivers and waterfalls) and exotic tribes to present themselves at the ceremony. Similarly, the various constructions of “mantay” are a request for the spirits to give protective cover or, given the shamanic propensity for strategic ambiguity, Rosalina’s statement that she covers the group with her protective forces.

The ambiguity of the lyrics may be unintentional in Rosalina’s case. However, it may nevertheless serve a purpose. Roseman writes that the Malaysian shaman willfully exploits the ambiguity of his text in order to establish his authority as a healer (Roseman 1996). Luna (1992:247) notes that one of his informants sang in three different languages, sometimes in the same song, “with the purpose of impressing and confusing rival shamans.” Briggs (1996) argues that shamanism in general, and the use of inaccessible language in particular, is about the production and reproduction of power structures within the ceremonial context as well as in the larger socio-political environment. I suggest that in this neo-shamanic context, where non-indigenous participants are not privy to the subtleties of indigenous language, that the use of Kichwa lyrics serve to place Rosalina firmly in control of the direction and execution of the ceremony, while also creating an atmosphere of disorientation that accentuates the psychoactive effects of the plants. Finally, the use of words and vocables inaccessible to the cognitive mind allow for the disengagement of the cognitive process, further allowing participants to slip into a trance state characterized by other forms of intellectual, emotional and sensory process.

The use of the word *piñon* in this song illustrates an important facet of these *icaros*, and of shamanic practice in general. While most of the species named in these *icaros* are Amazonian, Rosalina occasionally introduces elements that are important to the community where she is working. In this case, the piñon pine is a dominant species of the arid forests of the region where this recorded ceremony took place; elsewhere in these

recordings, she uses the term “*osha*,” *Ligusticum porteri*, a very important medicinal plant that is native to the mountains of the same region but is not found in South America.

Rosalina’s practice of adapting her ceremonies to address the needs of a given community calls to mind Joanna Overing’s notion of the shaman as “maker of worlds” (Overing 1990). In Overing’s estimation, the act of curing is a creative act which can not and must not be evaluated according to the tenets of Aristotelian logic. This creation of worlds is a process “of taking apart and putting together versions [of worlds] at hand,” in the case of the Piaroa *ruwang*, “the worlds of ‘before time’ and of ‘today time’” (Overing 1990:610). In Rosalina’s version, this might be the worlds of North and South America.

### Canción de los Tribus

Of particular interest is the *icaro* known as “Canción de los Tribus.” This song calls the names of various tribes of the Peruvian Amazon—Tikunas, Cocamas, Huitotos, Boras, Hokainas, Chamas, Jívaros, Huambisa, Ashaninkas, Chayawitas, Shipibos, Piros, Aguarunas, Chankas. Some of the Kichwa phrases discussed above appear here. Here we also see the phrase “*mai mantanini*.” The word “*mai*” is an interrogative marker that that roughly corresponds to “where?” In this situation, “*mai mantanini*” becomes a musicalized version of “*maymanda*,” “Where from?”

Tikunay maralla-dainini

Marallarai tikunai mi

Mai mantanini kayadi-di

Kayadituni mantainini

Cocama curakai-ni

Tribu tribu kayadi

Mai mantadininini

Cocamas curakayni

Tribu tribu kayadi

Mai mantanininini

Cocamas curakai nai-nini  
Cocamas shamudidi  
Mantai kunai-ni  
Kayadididi  
Cocamas nini  
Mantay ni ni  
Cocamas shamudi  
Mantay kayadididi  
(Vocables)...

Huitotos curakai-ni  
Tribu tribu kayadi  
Mai mantadininini ni ni  
Huitotos curakayni  
Tribu tribu kayadi  
Mai mantadininini  
Huitotos curakai-nainini  
Curanderos shamudididi  
Huitotos-nini  
Mantai kunai-ni  
Hai nai nai na, hai-nai-nai

Boras, Boras curakai-ni  
Tribu tribu kayadi  
Mai mantadininini ni ni  
Boras, Boras curakai-ni  
Tribu tribu kayadi  
Mai mantadininini ni ni  
Boras Boras shamui kunai kayadi  
Boras Boras shamudididi  
Mantay kunaini

Kayadididi

Boras Boras ni

Shamudidi

Half verse of vocables

Hokainas (?) curakai-ni

Tribu tribu kayadi

Mai mantadininini

Hokainas (?) curakai-ni

Tribu tribu kayadi

Mai mantadininini

Hokainas shamuni kaini kayadididi

Hokainas shamudidididi mantay kunaini

Kayadididi Hokainas-nini mantainini

Half verse of vocables

Hokainas shamudidididi mantay kunaini

Kayadididi nai nai nai...

At first glance, the repeated use of the word “*curakai-ni*” after the name of the tribe indicates that the shaman is calling the tribes, requesting them to come and bring their healing powers. The image of tribes as healers is affirmed by the use in the third verse of the line “*Curanderos shamudididi:*” “Healers, come.”

This conflation of tribes with healing powers recalls the anthropologist Michael Taussig’s argument (1987) that in the Putumayo of Ecuador, the lowland tribes were believed to be endowed with special healing powers, and the more “savage,” the more powerful. However, it also recalls a phenomenon almost universal throughout those very same lowland tribes themselves that the most powerful healers are always those of another tribe. In all cases, healing appears to be associated with the exotic, and if Taussig is correct, the savage.

However, on closer look, the word “*curakai*” has complex connotations that introduce questions pertaining to ethnogenesis and the history and cosmology of

ayahuasca shamanism. The Kichwa “*cura*,” which means “priest” in San Martín and “bald” in the Ecuadorian Oriente, comes from the Spanish “*cura*,” or priest, with etymological connection to “*curar*” (to heal) and to “*curate*” (an assistant to the clergy). The use of the word to mean “bald” probably refers to the appearance of the early Jesuit and Franciscan missionaries, who played a large role in the region’s history and the ethno-genesis of Kichwa-speaking lowland peoples.

The use of Kichwa as a lingua franca in the Amazon lowlands stems from the colonial period, when Catholic missionaries forced Amazon tribes together into communities called “*reducciones*,” where they were forced, or sometimes chose, to give up their native language in favor of Andean Quechua. In the *reducciones*, these tribes of shifting horticulturalists were forced into close contact with neighboring, often enemy, peoples. Disease ran rampant in the close quarters, decimating an already dwindling population. Researchers have posited the notion that ayahuasca shamanism, and the extreme elaboration of plant-based medicines found among some Kichwa-speaking groups, stems from this era of rampant disease, inter-tribal mixing and cultural change (Gow 1994; Taylor 2013; Highpine 2012; Brabec de Mori 2011). Today’s Amazonian Kichwa speakers are the descendants of those who fled the *reducciones* or otherwise survived this episode of Amazonian history.

With this history in mind, the invocation of the *cura* or priest in connection with the healing powers of the various tribes of the Amazon is very interesting indeed, lending credence to Gow’s assertion that the ceremonial trappings of ayahuasca shamanism have their root in Catholic practices (Gow 1994), as well as to Taussig’s discussion of the conflation of Catholicism and the healing powers of the Amazonian Indian (Taussig 1987).

In the *icaro* “Canción de los Tribus,” however, Rosalina does not just sing “*cura*” but “*curakai*.” In the Ecuadorian Oriente, the word “*curaga*” refers to “*el jefe de los animales*” (Orr and Wrisley 1981:51;). The master of the animals is a common character in the cosmologies of indigenous peoples throughout the Amazon. Traditionally one of the shaman’s primary jobs was to negotiate with the master of the animals for the release of game. Often this was accomplished through the bartering of human souls, contributing to the shaman’s morally ambiguous status in his community (Whitehead and Wright 2004).

Nevertheless, it was this barter, and the subsequent release of game for the hunt, that ensured the continued life of the tribe.

## Conclusion

A lyrical analysis of these songs has granted insight into the songs' functions, into historical processes associated with ayahuasca shamanism, and into some of the mythology, both scholarly and indigenous, surrounding the practice. Furthermore, these songs with their long lists of medicinal plants and powerful animals represent a storehouse of traditional ecological knowledge. This knowledge, and its deployment in the context of shamanic practice, is a form of cultural patrimony of the highest value, but one in which the contradictory forces of creativity and preservation are both equally at home. Because Rosalina's songs are memorized, they represent an inheritance from an earlier generation and a window into a slightly older version of a rapidly changing practice. Following the lineage of these songs, and engaging in a more complete exegesis of their meanings and uses with other practitioners, particularly her *maestro*, would prove a rewarding line of research.

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